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[Note From Original Author]

[image]

A note that I have full permission to have posted this book here, incase you didn't know/didn't believe I could show it. The message in green is the original author.

Prologue & Alliances

Prologue

It is to be noted that the long mountain range houses more then just the Tripe of Rushing Water. Another group of cats live there, similar and different from the Tribe in various ways.

I shall start with the similarities, this other group of cats, for they have no name, and are usually called by whomever is their leader at the time, is divided into hunters and fighters, much like the Tribe's cave-guards and prey-hunters.

This group also lives in a cave behind a waterfall, though the waterfall is just a trickling stream and the entrance is mostly covered by ivy. Also, the cats of the Tribe and this group share ancestors. Unfortunately, the similarities end there.

You see, my name is Song, I once lived by the lake where the Clans now dwell. When the three groups of cats that lived there broke apart; one part becoming loners, rogues, and kittypets; one part staying and living loosely to the former cats way of life; and the last part followed me far away.

We entered the mountains far north of the Tribe's home, though the weather is much the same, if not a bit warmer, since our territory is mostly large, low, grassy valleys surrounded by tall mountains. We settled in an earth cave in the side of a mountain and devised different ways of hunting and fighting the mountain birds, for we rarely saw any other cat for generations.

To say the least, it was idealistic, every cat always well fed, well trained, and comfortable. It remained so beyond my passing for several generations. The one fatal flaw in our life was that we lost our belief in ancestors in the sky almost as soon as we left the lake.

This flaw led to our second flaw, we organized the leadership in two parts. There was one leader for the hunters, and one leader for

the fighters. When I devised this, I hoped that the shared power would make it more difficult for tyranny to arise. But I was wrong.

The shared power led to bitter fights among the cats. This flaw led to a very grave mistake that haunts me still. You see, once, two leaders, both she-cats, fell in love with the same tom and hated each other. Blinded by their emotion, they led their cats against each other.

The fight was very fatal, only a handful of cats surviving. The two leaders had killed each other. That paved the way for two ambitious brothers, one a hunter, the other a fighter, to become the leaders. Both of the brothers had a strange way of looking down on she-cats after the fight. They thought she-cats were too emotional to think straight and passed a law that no she-cat could ever become leader.

Because of the fatal battle, there wasn't enough opposition to stop them, and most cats saw sense in the law. But that one rule, even though the brothers loved their she-cat friends, and just thought them incapable to put sense in front of emotion, led the way for harsher rules.

It continued with the leader of toms, some more shrewd, some more lenient, but all looking down on she-cats. Over countless generations, it came to a time when all she-cats were assigned to toms as kits through their father and their one sole duty was to make their mates happy and bear their kits.

She-cats weren't allowed to learn to hunt or fight, they weren't allowed to go out of the cave without their mates, they were only allowed to learn how to heal, and they weren't even allowed to be seen talking alone to a tom outside their family. The punishment against these rules stretched from a beating to death, depending on the broken rule and who broke it for whom.

Even though I myself am a she-cat, the founder of these cats who set them up and formed rock from clay, my gender was being degraded and the immorality just kept becoming more and more apparent.

I wish that I, or the other ancestors, could have done something to

stop it. But because our descendants didn't believe in ancestors, we had no connection to them, and could only wait and hope that some cat could stop those horrendous crimes from becoming our family's one and only legacy.

Legacy: Alliances

Hunters

Leader: Hawk- Lithe brown tom with sharp blue eyes and off-white ears. **Mate**: Droplet- Elegant silver she-cat with soft gray eyes and a white stripe on her muzzle.

Hunters:

Scratch- Gray-brown tom with dull brown eyes. **Mate**: Shimmer- Black she-cat with white tipped tail, ears, and chest; blue eyes.

Hare- Pale brown tom with tufted ears and amber eyes. **Mate**: Twist- Amber and brown tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes.

Spider- Long legged black tom with brown tabby stripes and yellow eyes. **Mate: Undecided**

Ice- Pale silver tom with white ears and pale blue eyes. **Mate**: Storm- Dark gray she-cat with orange eyes.

Nightly- Black tom with amber eyes. **Mate: Undecided**

Tuft- Gray tom with tufted ears, long fur, and tufted tail; green eyes. **Mate**: Grass- Pale gray she-cat with bright green eyes.

Trainees. Cats ages 5-8 moons.

Scamp- Black and red tom with unruly fur and bright amber eyes. **Mate**: Squirrel- Red she-cat with a fluffy tail and blazing green eyes.

Kits: (cats under five moons)

Tangle- Gray-brown tom with dull blue eyes and white tipped tail. (Scratch, Shimmer)

Mudslide- Dark brown tom with black paws and amber eyes. (Hare, Twist)

Whisper- Lithe silver she-cat with darker flecks and green eyes. (Hare, Twist)

Fighters

Leader: Crag- Large black tom with gray ears and brown eyes.
Mate: Leaf- Golden and white dappled she-cat with soft fur and green eyes.

Fighters:

Fox- Lanky red tom with green eyes and ripped tail tip. **Mate: Deceased, no new one yet named.**

Boulder- Muscular, solid gray tom with amber eyes. **Mate**: Red- Mottled red, brown she-cat with white paws and blue eyes

Swallowtail- Brown and red tom with a gray tail and gray eyes. **Mate**: Swirl- Black and gray mottled she-cat with dark blue, almost black, eyes.

Pebble- Mottled gray-brown tom with green eyes. **Mate: Undecided**

Snake- Black tom with brown speckles and dark brown eyes. **Mate**: Crisp- Orange-brown she-cat with amber eyes.

Trainees. Cats ages 5-8 moons.

Trip- White and brown tom with large, clumsy paws and blue eyes. **Mate**: Cinder- Fluffy gray she-cat with green eyes

Sleet- Muscular, white tom with yellow eyes. **Mate: Undecided**

Kits. (cats less then five moons)

Cliff- Gray tom with brown paws and blue eyes(Swallowtail, Swirl)

Tinge- White she-cat with gray tinged tips and yellow

eyes(Swallowtail, Swirl)

Night- Large black tom with brown ears and paws; amber eyes(Crag, Leaf)

Chapter 1: Two Kits And A Dream

Chapter 1: Two Kits And A Dream

Droplet looked down at her two new kits. Born just yesterday they still had their eyes closed, their ears were wrinkled, and they mewled quietly, the sound muffled by her belly fur. She lay in a soft nest of grass and moss on the dirt floor of the kit-den.

Golden light filtered in and dappled her silver pelt with its soft glow. The light came from a patchy hole in the side of the ceiling that was mostly blocked by a light curtain of lichen and the light wasn't strong enough to light up the corners of the den, but let enough light in to see.

She glanced across the den, Shimmer, an older black she-cat with white tipped tail, ears, and chest, was curled around her one kit, Tangle. It was the she-cat's second litter and although all but one kit had died from her first litter, it seemed that the she-cat didn't mind not having more then one kit.

Droplet could understand. Every she-cat hated to have kits in this life. Although toms had a good enough life, she-cats were haunted with every step. She supposed she was one of the lucky she-cats, her mate, Hawk, was fair to her and had never scratched her unless she accidentally slipped up in front of other toms.

And with him being the leader of the hunters, no tom dared flirt with her in his sight, for he wasn't fond of letting any other tom near her. She looked down at her two kits, would her she-kit be fortunate like her?

She sighed and closed her soft gray eyes, but she couldn't sleep. She could still hear Hawk outside the den, bragging about his new kits to all the other toms like a go-lucky fool. Not that she could say even the slightest reprimand.

Her ears flicked as she heard Twist enter the den. The she-cat's steps were dragging and heavy and Droplet caught the sharp, salty tang of blood. She could hear Mudslide taunting his sister, Whisper, but the little she-kit made no sound of protest.

Droplet opened her eyes into slits. She could see Mudslide scratching his sister's ears. Twist looked like she wanted to protest, but she knew as well as Droplet that Mudslide would screech for his father, Hare, and that Hare would beat both Twist and Whisper, harsher then what the tom kit was doing to his sister.

Twist sat in her nest and Whisper ducked behind her, hiding from her brother, her silver ears stained red with blood, hiding the scars of the other scratches she'd received from Mudslide or any other tom who cared to do her harm.

Droplet swallowed hard, would her tom kit be like that? She hoped he'd be more like his father and be fair to his mate. *Speaking of mates, has Hawk decided who our kit's mates will be?* Her son would, of course, be able to change his mate pick when he became a trainee if he wanted, but her daughter would be stuck with whoever chose her.

She studied her kits again, her worries swept away in an emotion of love. Mudslide had fallen quiet as he suckled, kicking Whisper back until he was full. The kits fell asleep as the soft orange light turned to silvery-blue.

Droplet was again overcome with a desire to go outside and see the night sky, just like every night. But it was forbidden to leave the cave after dusk, whether if it was to stop cats from falling down the steep-sloped loose rock and dirt, or to stop escapees, she didn't know, but she'd never seen the sky at night.

She looked at the hole, trying to see past the lichen, but all she could see was black and a dot of white. *What's out there?* She stiffened her curiosity, it was dangerous for a she-cat to have curiosity, it might make her do something that would harm her.

She looked back at her kits, studying once again the pattern of their pelts. Her tom was patched black and white, his face white with

black ears and his back was black as well as half his sides and his back left leg while the rest was white, except his black tipped tail.

Her she-kit had a more simple pelt, a solid dark gray color tinted blue, Hawk said she was the color of storm clouds on a warm afternoon. The kind that would drop heavy rains and blow it into the entrance, bringing a taste of wildness with it.

Droplet drew her white striped muzzle over her she-kit, the gentle curve that was a symbol of a she-cat was smooth. Her fur was soft and a sweet scent promised a very popular she-cat among the toms. Droplet had mixed feelings toward that, it might mean her kit was more well cared for, but it might make her too temping for the lowly toms with no moral.

She jerked her head up in surprise as she heard quick paw-steps at the entrance of the den. The scent of tom wafted to her and she curled around her kits more tightly as she watched in apprehension for who would emerge.

She relaxed and gave a soundless sigh of relief when she saw her mate, Hawk. She nuzzled him in the usual greeting of a she-cat to her mate. Hawk gave her a small purr, his blue eyes were still bright with pride and exhilaration.

She wanted to ask what names he chose, but she couldn't say anything unless he gave her permission. "I can't believe how perfect they are! A beautiful she-cat and a brave tom! I can see them now, the tom will become leader after me and the she-kit will join the Fighters and Hunters again!" Hawk mewed happily, and his creamy-white ears twitched with excitement.

I'd forgotten about that. Every generation or so the she-kit of the leader of the Hunter of Fighter leader becomes mates with the other leader's son. And since Crag and Leaf don't have a daughter, my daughter will be mates with their son.

She wanted to growl, Crag's and Leaf's son, Night, was arrogant, impudent, and obnoxious, acting as if he was already a leader when he wasn't even a trainee yet. He also looked at she-cats like they were toys, constantly flirting with them even though he was only

four moons old.

She pushed the negative thoughts away, there was nothing she could do, she just hoped her daughter could hold out while Night matured, hopefully.

She reminded herself that she wanted to know her kit's names. Hawk would have decided by now. She looked at him, he was watching her gently and lovingly, he only looked at her like when they were alone at night.

He must have seen she wanted to ask him something and he dipped his head, "What is it?" he asked, his voice just a soft whisper in her ear. Although she didn't truly love him like she might have been able to do with a tom of her choice, she did care for him and was grateful for his kindness and understanding.

"What are their names?" she asked softly, making her gaze wide and innocent, she knew he liked that.

Hawk purred more loudly. "The tom is Pepper, Fox was telling me about pepper yesterday, he said he heard about it from a passing rogue and that its black and makes a cat sneeze. I thought that was funny and I like the name," Hawk mewed, his blue eyes shining in amusement.

Droplet nodded and purred, she liked the name as well, even though she wouldn't have picked it. "And the she-kit?" she prompted softly.

Hawk gave her a less then amused look, but he didn't comment on her words that could be seen as demanding in the eyes of the toms who expected their mates to worship them. "The she-kit is Rainstone, kind of continuing after your name and for my father, Stone," Hawk mewed, looking a little embarrassed at the almost peculiar name he'd chosen.

Droplet purred, she loved the name that honored both their family's. She touched the little she-kit, Rainstone, with her muzzle. "I love you," she purred, nuzzling Hawk. That was probably the one thing she-cats could do without permission.

Hawk purred, "I love you too, don't ever forget that," he purred in her ear. He pressed against her for a long time, then drew away and turned, padding out of the den, probably going to his own private den. She usually slept with him in there, but this was where she had to stay as long as she had kits.

It felt weird, to be going to sleep without Hawk wrapped around her, but it was nice to have a break from him. She stroked Pepper and Rainstone with her paw and then rested her chin on her paws and went to sleep.

...

Droplet dreamed that night, which she found odd since she didn't usually dream. And she found it especially weird since her dreams had never been so vivid and seemed so real.

She dreamed she was standing on the top of one of the three tallest mountains, the other two at her sides, forming the round valley below where she lived. The view left her breathless, just like the first time she'd ever seen it.

The bright green valley sparkled with the reflection of light off of wet rocks. The few tall trees cast dancing shadows on the green-gray landscape, and the waving grass rippled like a massive wave. While the small stream that trickled through the valley bubbled and leapt in the early morning light.

The sky was a pale pink, gray clouds below her paws blocked out the rising sign, keeping the light gray. The wind, although she could feel it whirling around her, like cats softly brushing her pelt, made no sound over the rock.

She felt a whispering, a murmuring, an urging to look at the other mountain peaks. She looked, and even though she shouldn't have been able see so far, she saw two cats. Two cats in their prime, she'd never seen them before but she felt like she knew them.

One was a black and white tom, his blue eyes looked like Hawk's blue eyes. His eyes were sad, worried, anxious for something she didn't know. But she thought he looked like some cat she knew, the

way his face was white with black ears...

Her gaze was forced toward the she-cat, her dark gray fur had a shimmer of blue, it was long and soft and her small, slender shape was beautiful. But she didn't look like any she-cat she'd ever seen, the defiant light in her dark blue, almost black, eyes, and the proud slope of her shoulders while her head was tilted inquiringly, almost mockingly, as she glared at nothing.

Droplet felt sudden fear for the she-cat. *She'll be killed with that kind of attitude!* She thought, forgetting that she was in a dream. She suddenly felt tired and her legs collapsed beneath her, all she saw as she closed her eyes was the two pairs of blue eyes, one sorrowful the other defiant...

Chapter 2: Just A Kit

Chapter 2: Just A Kit

Rainstone crouched on the ground, her eyes fixed on her prey, a thin black snake that whisked from side to side rhythmically. Waggling her haunches, she pounced, claws unsheathed.

A exclaiming cry of protest rang out, the cry muffled by the small dirt walls of the den. "Rainstone!" the sharp rebuke came from her mother. Rainstone retracted her claws and stood back as Pepper whisked his black-tipped tail away and gave it a few licks, giving her an annoyed glare.

"You mustn't do that to Pepper!" her mother, Droplet mewed, her voice had a tinge of horror in it. Rainstone swished her plumy tail along the floor mutinously.

"But Mudslide attacks his sister all the time! And I was being good, I didn't even scratch him!" she protested. One moon old and impatient, she couldn't comprehend why she wasn't aloud to go explore with Pepper or play roughly with any cat like Pepper, Tangle, and Mudslide did.

Why, she'd even been cuffed by her father for defending herself when Tangle leapt on her and started clawing her! Her scratches still stung and her belly burned with resentment.

She looked at Pepper, he was pouncing on a beetle that had somehow made its way into the den, the entire episode of the tail obviously forgotten. *Pepper* didn't care that she played with him roughly, but no cat would let her anyways!

She gave her paw a quick lick, licking it again as it twitched a few times on its own. "When can I go out into the cave? And when can I start training?" she asked in a sigh. She wanted to be a fighter! She wanted to run outside and climb the highest mountains!

But that would be impossible, so every cat told her. She didn't understand why, Tangle and Mudslide would be hunters, as well as Pepper, but she'd been told she also couldn't even be a hunter.

So what am I supposed to do than? She thought in frustration, her paws itched and she wanted to actually do something! Without cats telling her 'no' every time she attempted to do it.

She looked up as Droplet draped her silver tail over her shoulders. Rainstone shrugged it off, she didn't want to be comforted, she wanted to have more freedom! Was that really too much to ask?

She padded back into the shadows as Mudslide padded in with Whisper. She flicked her tail to get the silver kit's attention, but Whisper's green eyes were tired and miserable. The kit just went to her nest and curled down to sleep.

Mudslide raced over to Pepper, leaping on her brother and tussling the smaller kit to the ground. Rainstone wanted to rush over and join in, but she knew what she would be told. *You're just a she-kit! You can't play, you're only good to look at and being used.*

Those were the words Mudslide had told her so often. She didn't know what use looking at her would be or what being used was. And she had no idea why her being a she-kit would have to do with anything, but apparently it had to do with a lot of things.

Rainstone lashed her tail as Hawk came in. Her father strutted toward his son proudly, giving his an approving look as the young tom wrestled Mudslide off. "Where's your sister?" Hawk asked.

Rainstone pricked her ears, she'd never heard him ask for her before. Pepper looked around, his gaze resting on her, even though she was practically invisible in the dark shadows with her dark pelt and dark eyes.

Pepper flicked his tail in her direction and Hawk looked over to her. "I see you have sharp eyes, Pepper, that'll be good for being a hunter," Hawk purred as he padded toward her.

Rainstone looked at her father defiantly, she hadn't done anything

worthy of a lecture in the past few days, following the strange and stupid rules for the most part. "Rainstone, it is time for you to see where you live," Hawk announced.

Rainstone jumped to her paws, her ears pricked and her tail erect. *Finally!* She muttered under her breath. "Pepper, come join us on the stroll," Hawk called the black and white kit.

Rainstone was about to complain about why he had to come when he'd already seen the cave, when Droplet covered her mouth with her tail. Chocking, she glanced up into her mother's worried blue eyes.

"Rainstone, when you leave don't say anything, be respectful, and only speak if you are spoken to. And on top of it all, be sweet!" Droplet hissed in her ears.

Be sweet? What kind of advice was that? Shrugging, she pulled away and bounded after Hawk and Pepper. She followed them out, pushing softly in her excitement to see the cave. Pepper didn't say anything, but the cold look of disapproval Hawk gave her made her slow down and wait her turn.

The cave was brighter then she thought, green light flooding in from behind an ivy curtain where she could see the glimmer of water running down besides it, over the hole where the cats evidently slipped in and out.

The ground under paw was different from the grassy dirt of the kit-den. It was mostly smooth rock, cool to her touch and smooth with warm dirt filling in between the dappled stone. Looking up, she saw the roof of the cave was a mix of rock and dirt, she could even see some roots, indicating things grew above them.

Looking around, the cave seemed full of cats, and several tunnels like the kit-den were in the sides of the wall. She counted seven other dens than the kit-den in total and wondered what so many dens could be used for. She noticed that although the sides of the den were made of dirt just like the kit-den, the back wall was pure rock with water cascading down it, the gentle splashing intrigued her and she wanted nothing more than dab her paws in it.

Her sharp eyes noticed that the water was caught in a rock ditch and streamed out on the lower side of the cave, disappearing through a small tunnel. She had forgotten to ask questions in her close study of the cave and turned to see Hawk had left her and Pepper and was talking to a large black tom with gray ears and brown eyes.

"What's he doing?" she asked Pepper.

Pepper glanced at her, "He said he was getting something ready. Tangle will be made a Trainee today you know, I wouldn't be surprised if he's arranging which cats will help train him," Pepper mewed.

Rainstone nodded, stifling a twinge of jealousy, her time would come. "How many cats train a cat?" she asked, she only knew that more than one cat helped train.

"I think two or three, so that the cat isn't taught just one way of hunting, but is given several different techniques," Pepper mewed.

Rainstone nodded, that sounded smart. Excitement flashed through her paws. "I can't wait to start training!" she mewed happily, remembering just in time to keep her voice quiet, as Droplet always told her.

Pepper's blue eyes flashed with uneasiness, which confused Rainstone. "Look, Rainstone," Pepper began in a low mutter, but he stopped as Hawk padded back to them.

"So, Rainstone, I'll show what all the dens are for and then I want you to meet some cat," Hawk mewed. Rainstone nodded.

"Those two," Hawk mewed, pointing with his tail at two large tunnels side by side, "Are for the hunters and fighters, we don't sleep in the same dens, for whatever reason," Hawk shrugged as if it didn't concern him.

"Then those two," he mewed, pointing at the two dens at the sides of the rock wall in the back, "Those are for the leaders," he mewed, taking a breath to continue.

"So you sleep in one of those?" Rainstone piped up, too interested in studying the naturally made dens to remember to not interrupt. Hawk gave her a glare and cuffed her ears lightly.

"Don't interrupt," he growled, his gaze flashing around as if looking to see if any cat was watching them. Rainstone didn't know why, but he seemed to relax when he saw no cat was watching.

"Then that one," he mewed, pointing to the den next to the kit-den, "That's where the she-cats keep the herbs for healing," Hawk mewed. Rainstone wanted to ask why only she-cats healed, but she wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

"And that one," he mewed pointing at a lone den all by itself, it was lower then the others and Rainstone noticed small claw marks were made on a rock near the entrance. Too small to be a full grown cat's, but bigger then hers.

"That is the den for the trainees," Hawk mewed.

Rainstone noticed that there was only one. "So both trainees for hunters and fighters share the same den?" she mewed.

Hawk gave her a curt nod, his annoyance showed only in the twitch of his tail. "But they don't share when they finish their training?" Rainstone affirmed.

Hawk gave her a you-better-be-quiet look as he nodded again. Rainstone shrugged, this was her first time seeing the cave! Wasn't it natural that she'd be asking questions?

"Come on, there's someone who I want you to meet," Hawk told her, lashing his tail he gave her a glare. "But you need to be quiet and not say a word, and you also need to look respectful," he added.

Rainstone tilted her head up at him and narrowed her eyes. "Why?" she asked.

Hawk hissed, "When I tell you to do something don't ask why!" he hissed, cuffing her ears, this time hard enough to make her shake her head as her ears rang.

She fumed silently as she stomped after Pepper and Hawk. She didn't know why she couldn't be given a reason for what she was told to do, or more accurately, why she was told not to do so many things!

Hawk led her and Pepper to the last den which he hadn't named. "This is the kit-den for the fighters," Hawk announced outside. Rainstone snorted. *So we're separate as kits, together as trainees, and then separate again? Pick one please!*

Hawk motioned for them to stay where they are and Rainstone wondered who he wanted them to meet. He appeared a moment later, two cats following him out. Rainstone studied them and memorized them in a moment.

The she-cat that had appeared was larger then Droplet, her fur was sparkling gold and white with a soft glow, making Rainstone think it would be soft. Her green eyes were almost the same shade as the green ivy curtain, just a smidge paler then the vibrant plant.

The tom kit reminded her of the tom that her father had been talking to earlier. He was large and already muscular. His black pelt pulled tightly over his muscle. His ears were dark brown instead of gray though, and his paws looked like they were covered with mud, but she knew from scent that his fur was just brown.

Rainstone was caught in his amber eyes though. They glimmered like the last rays of sunset with a more vivid orange-red glow, like she was looking in a sparkling pool of red. She blinked, she had noticed the arrogant look in his eyes, she didn't like this cat, no matter how handsome he may be.

"Night, this is Rainstone, your possible mate, you must choose by tonight when you become a Trainee along with Rainstone," Hawk mewed. *Trainee?* Rainstone felt a rush of excitement, she wouldn't have to wait four moons after all!

Then she frowned, *Mate? Isn't that what Droplet and Hawk are? But I'm just a kit!* Panic and excitement overwhelmed her for a moment and she just stared at Night as he looked her over.

She wanted to flinch as he padded closer, nudging her all over, his muzzle running along the smooth curve of her ribs. "I like this cat, and you don't have any other she-kits at the moment," Night murmured.

He nodded and pulled away from her, "I want this cat to be my mate," he mewed to Hawk.

Hawk nodded, "I'll tell Crag then, we'll be all set tonight then!" he mewed happily. Rainstone blinked, she didn't understand what was happening, though Pepper looked subdued, as if he had just been scolded.

"Come on," Hawk mewed, "We have to tell your mother the good news," he purred. Rainstone skittered after him, but she cast one look back at the sympathetic she-cat and the bold tom. She couldn't help but shiver in dread.

...

"Rainstone will be a Trainee tonight! Along with her mate, Night!" Hawk purred to Droplet. Droplet looked stunned, and Rainstone could see how forced the purr was.

"How can I be a mate!" Rainstone protested, "I'm not even two moons old yet!" she mewed. She had mixed feelings about the arrangement, although she'd have more freedom then before, she wasn't sure how she was going to be a Trainee when she wasn't five moons old yet.

"Why am I becoming a Trainee right now anyways? I'm not five moons!" She mewed when no cat answered her.

"That rule applies for toms who actually need physical strength for their training," Hawk mewed, though his eyes were gentler than before.

Rainstone blinked, "What will I be learning then?" she asked.

"You'll learn how to heal, learn our history, and learn the proper way to act to a tom," Hawk mewed. "Which you could very well use," he added in a lower voice.

Rainstone lashed her tail, "Will I get to go outside?" she demanded.

"When Night decides to take you outside to gather herbs, you will be able to go outside," Hawk mewed sharply. "And you will not demand things from him or any other cat!" Hawk hissed, his tail lashed.

Rainstone glared and faced her father, unsheathing her claws. "I don't want to do this!" she hissed.

"Its not your choice," Hawk spat back, "You will do what you'll told and accept it without question!" he hissed. Rainstone growled, *do they want me to be a mindless idiot?!*

Snarling, she whipped around and curled down in the nest, wishing to just sleep forever. Hawk sighed and murmured to Droplet, "She's going to be killed with that attitude," Rainstone was sure she wasn't supposed to hear that and just curled up tighter.

"Whose Tangle's mate going to be?" Pepper asked. *Yeah, which she-cat is going to be forced into this with me? Will it be Whisper?*

"Tangle doesn't have a mate yet, there aren't enough she-cat's right now," Hawk mewed. Rainstone's belly churned with anger.

"What about Whisper?" Pepper asked, was that hope in his voice?

"Whisper will be your mate, unless some cat has more she-kits, then we can reconsider," Hawk answered evenly.

Rainstone growled in her throat as she heard the happy swish in Pepper's tail. Was he really attracted to the she-kit?

She looked up at Droplet, fear and anxiousness pushing away her anger. "How can I be a Trainee? I can't even eat solid food yet!" she wailed.

"You're almost two moons old now," Hawk responded, "You will be just fine on solid food," he mewed, flicking his tail lightly over her ears. "Have strength, I know you're a bit young, but it'll be all right," he murmured.

Rainstone didn't respond, just looked at the light that was beginning to turn orange, it was almost time. Hawk got up and nodded at his family before exiting, no doubt to get Tangle ready, the tom hadn't been in the den all day, and neither had his mother, Shimmer.

Rainstone curled down in her nest, ignoring Pepper's friendly attempts to cheer her up. He gave up after a while and went to go play with Mudslide. Rainstone stayed and felt miserable for the next little while in the nest.

Then Hawk was calling for her. She got up and shook out her ruffled fur and padded to where he waited at the entrance. "You'll stand by Night when he accepts you as his mate, and you'll follow him and not say anything, go it?" Hawk confirmed.

Rainstone gave a noncommittal grunt. She was dazed by how fast everything was happening. This morning she didn't even know what outside the kit-den looked like! And now she was going to be a Trainee? She felt like she didn't know how to do anything!

She padded over to where Tangle and Night were. Another tom was there, an older tom with a brown and white pelt and large paws that looked too big for him. His blue eyes shone with excitement, mirrored in the she-cat that stood next to him, a pace behind his shoulder.

The she-cat was dark gray with a fluffy pelt and bright green eyes. They were too old to be kits, what were they doing here?

But she couldn't pay attention to that, Hawk and the large black tom with gray ears she'd seen earlier were speaking. "Tonight, we witness the change in the growing of our young," Hawk began, "And we are here to watch the ceremonies," he mewed.

The white and brown tom padded forward with the gray she-cat. "Trip, Cinder, it is time for you two to complete your training. As in custom with tradition, you will have the next half moon to cross our territory and climb to the top of the three Great Peaks that protect our home. You will eat hearty tonight and leave at day break," the black tom mewed.

"That's Crag," Nigh whispered in her ear, "He's my father," he added, his voice smooth. *Like a snake*, she thought, it was too easy to picture Night as a snake. But than she realized what he'd told her, that meant that Crag was the leader of the Fighters.

Rainstone watched as cheers erupted from the assembled cats, mostly they came from the toms. Then Tripe and Cinder stepped back and Tangle stepped forward. The gray-brown tom's fur twitched with excitement and his white tipped tail flicked from side to side.

"Tangle," Hawk stepped forward for the Hunter Trainee. "Your trainers will be Spider, Ice, and Nightly," Hawk mewed. The three toms padded out and dipped their heads to their Trainee and stepped back with Tangle beside them.

Again, cheers erupted. Then Night stepped forward, but Rainstone stayed in her place, as Hawk had instructed her. Crag turned to his son, his large brown eyes glimmered with pride. If all went well, Night would be the next leader of the Fighters.

"Night, your trainers will be Fox, Boulder, and Pebble," again, the named three toms stepped forward and dipped their heads, but when they stepped back, Nigh remained.

"In addition, you have agreed to your chosen mate. Do you willingly take Rainstone as your mate?" Crag mewed formally.

"Yes," Night mewed, his voice strong and sure.

"Then I name Rainstone as your mate, she is your responsibility and yours to do as you please," Crag mewed. Rainstone, knowing this as her time, stepped forward to Night's side. It was painfully obvious that she was so small. Her head only reaching Night's shoulder when she stretched and he slumped.

They're lucky that I'm too tired to protest and make trouble. She thought, her paws burning at Crag's words, like Night owned her now.

She wanted to cry, but she was a Trainee now, not a kit, she

couldn't act like a kit. She stood as cheers and boisterous toms pushed around her. She didn't know what happened, she just saw a whiz of faces of toms pushing toward her and flirting before they were pushed away.

She just blinked blankly at it all until Night shoved her toward the Trainee's den. She stumbled inside. The den was dark, just barely illuminated by the light from outside. The walls were rock, and so was the roof, she could feel the cold stone, sucking out warmth.

But the ground was soft, it felt like it was grass and feathers. "The moss floor makes up for the stone walls," Night mewed from behind her. *So that's what it is, moss.*

She forgot to be scared as curiosity surged through her. She padded around the den, there were several nests made of the softer moss and feathers and smelling strongly of different cats.

"Rainstone, I want to introduce you to the other Trainees," Night called from the entrance, his brown ears outlined against the light the came through the entrance.

She padded to him, forgetting to be indignant of his orders in her anxious of meeting the other Trainees. She blinked her eyes against the bright light, adjusting her eyes to the light.

She was met by Tangle, a muscular white tom, and another tom who stood with a she-cat. Tangle gave her a disdainful glance, as if he wasn't happy his old den-mate was coming with him to the Trainee den. But he didn't say anything, just slid past her into the den, bumping her against the wall as he brushed by.

"Rainstone, this is Sleet," Night mewed, nodding at the white tom. Sleet's yellow eyes flitted over her.

"A bit young for a mate, eh?" he mewed teasingly.

Night bristled, "She'll grow in no time!" he mewed defensively. Whether it was because he wanted to defend her, or not look like his mate was no good, Rainstone didn't know.

Sleet just shrugged and touched Rainstone lightly. "See you around

pretty, little kitty," he purred brushing by her gently to the den. Rainstone shivered, she hadn't like the way he'd looked at her with hungry eyes, as if she was a special piece of prey to be caught.

Night glared after the tom, his jaws twitching in the beginnings of a snarl. Then he turned to the last two cats left, a tom and his mate no doubt.

"This is Scamp and his mate, Squirrel," Night mewed, relaxing. Rainstone studied Scamp, he had a weird black and red patched pelt and his fur was unruly, as if he never groomed it. His amber eyes were bright and laughing and she got a good feeling while looking at him.

The she-cat beside him, Squirrel, looked fun as well. Her dark red fur and fluffy tail gave her an excited look which her blazing green eyes mirrored.

"Don't worry, kit, you'll make it through, you've got a good cat to watch over you," Scamp mewed, dipping his head to Night. Night purred and nodded in thank before turning back into the den, the light becoming too dim to see anything.

He missed the gleam of ambition in Scamp's eye. Suddenly Rainstone understood why he had so plaintively flattered Night. *Night is the future Fighter leader, if they're friends, it'll put Scamp in a good position.*

She admired his manipulation, and she felt that his support was real toward her, but she wondered what game he was playing at. She frowned and turned into the den before he could ask her any questions.

For a moment, she didn't know where to sleep, but then she remembered she was Night's mate. *Which means I sleep with him.* Shivering, she padded over to where he laid. He shifted and made room for her to curl down at his belly, one paw lying over her shoulder as he went to sleep.

But it felt weird, she felt too young to even begin to scratch the surface of what was happening. Her mind couldn't comprehend all

these strange things. Finally, worn out by her turbulent thoughts, she fell asleep where she dreamed she was in a bright green meadow chasing butterflies. After all, she was just a kit.

Chapter 3: Rules And Regulations

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Rainstone muttered under her breath as she sorted through the blackberry leaves, *once again*. She lashed her tail as she sat in the herb-den, sorting through her piles of herbs. Every she-cat had their own little stash they used for their toms specifically that were kept in a specific place in the den.

Her herbs were stored in a small chink in the stone wall. Like the main cave, only its back wall was stone and water dripped down one side, pooling in the corner with a rhythmic splash. It was the one sound that kept her from going insane from boredom.

Two moons into her training and she had yet to leave the cave. The older she-cats had brought her herbs and told her over and over what they were called and their usage. Rainstone, with a knack for remembering things, had memorized every known herb in the mountain.

She lashed her tail and licked her still kit-soft fur. Only four moons and almost finished with training, as training would only last until Night was eight moons and she was five moons. *At least the rule is you can't mate with a she-cat until they're six moons,* she thought gloomily.

Night had hinted plenty of times that he looked forward to mating with her, but she had to be six moons and he had to be eight moons, as the rules stated. Just one of the many rules she'd learned.

She'd also learned everything a she-cat couldn't do, which included; not speaking without being spoken too, not leaving the cave without a tom of her family or her mate, not flirting with any tom other than her mate, not learning how to hunt or fight, not being able to be a leader, not mating with another tom, and never

complaining.

Just thinking of it made her pelt prickle with defiance. Who were they to tell her what she could and couldn't do? Why did something two she-cats did countless seasons ago have so much effect on life today?

She'd heard the story of the two quarrelling she-cat leaders, blinded by their emotions they killed each other and led many of their cats to their death. Her tutor, Crisp, the mate of a fighter, for by Rainstone being the mate of a fighter she got a tutor on the fighter side, didn't even seem to care that she-cats were discriminated.

It made Rainstone growl with indignation about the regulations. Not to mention all the rules when acting with her mate. Be polite, be loving, tell him everything he wants to hear, do whatever he wants you to do; it was like she wasn't supposed to have a mind of her own!

But I do have a mind, and I do have my own thoughts! She thought angrily, accidentally tearing a blackberry leaf in her silent fume.

"What are you doing?!" Crisp's rolling mew, like water over stone, drifted to her ear. Rainstone guiltily hid the torn leaf beneath her paw.

"I'm sorting out my herb store," Rainstone answered in a growl. At least she could let her temper flare at other she-cats without getting a scratched ear.

Crisp glared at her through narrowed amber eyes and Rainstone glared back. Crisp sighed, "Look, Snake and Night are going to take you and me out on a stroll at dusk so that I can show you the different plants so you know what they look like, though you could probably guess from the leaves," Crisp mewed with a sigh.

The older she-cat's orange-brown fur was ruffled by a small draft that ran down the stone wall and Rainstone glanced a fresh slice on her shoulder. It was shallow and wasn't even bleeding anymore, but it would be painful.

Bitterness filled Rainstone, Snake had done that, Crisp's mate. How could they say that they loved them and then treat them so horribly? Her tail whisked over the floor. "I'll be ready," she promised Crisp, carefully putting the leaves back in the chink.

Stepping back as Crisp left, she lapped up a few mouthfuls of water, enjoying the untainted taste of the water that pooled in a stone hollow like a perfectly round bowl. Her whiskers twitched as she sat up, flicking off tiny droplets of water.

She craned her neck to see into the main cave and she growled when she saw Mudslide chatting with Sleet. Although the older white cat had become a full-fledged fighter, Mudslide had joined the Trainees a few days ago, turning five moons.

He didn't have a mate yet, since Storm's new kits, two being she-kits, didn't even have their eyes open yet. But he had been promised one as soon as they were three moons. Tangle had been promised the other

Although, Whisper remained in the kit den with her mother, Twist, since Pepper still had a moon to go until he would be a trainee. *Lucky*, Rainstone thought jealousy, *she'll be six moons when she becomes a Trainee, I was Trainee when I was barely two moons!*

Sighing, she knew it wasn't Whisper's fault, in fact, she'd quite enjoyed Whisper's friendship in the first moon, since Squirrel hadn't seemed too interested in being her friend. Squirrel seemed only to be friends with Cinder, who had returned with her mate, Trip, and they'd both finished their training.

She glanced up as Pepper trotted into the medicine-den. She purred and rushed to touch noses. She didn't have to pretend for him, he liked her just the way she was and would listen to her rants on how unfair everything was, agreeing with practically everything she said and not telling any other cat how she felt.

He was the only tom she didn't despise. "Hey, how's it going?" Pepper asked, draping his tail around her shoulders and pulling her close so that their flanks touched.

Rainstone relaxed against him, glad to have some cat to talk to. "Its been like always," she sighed. "Look what Night gave me just because I asked to go outside!" she mewed indignantly, running her paw over a small nick in her ear.

Pepper gave a small gasp and licked her ear gently, taking the burning sting out of her anger. "I'm sorry, I'll talk to him if you want," he offered.

"Would you?" Rainstone purred, nuzzling him. "That'd be so nice," she sighed, wondering if he could get Night to allow her to ask him a question without clawing her.

Warm with affection, she'd forgotten that she was going out with Nigh at dusk, which was almost there. Gasping, she jumped up and rapidly started licking the scraps of dirt and leaves from her fur.

"Night is taking me out tonight, and I just have to look perfect for his *majesty*," she growled the last part, resentment pricking at her claws.

Pepper nodded, his blue eyes sympathetic as he helped her groom her fur. When they had finished it was almost time to leave and Rainstone hastily said goodbye to Pepper.

"You're the best tom I'll ever know," she mewed, touching noses with him.

Pepper nodded and sighed, "I wish there were more cats who understood, but for now, we've just got to live with it," he sighed.

Rainstone nodded, sorry that she made Pepper so anxious, but she couldn't help how she felt about this life. She knew he was worried she'd do something that would get her killed, but she had promised she wouldn't do anything until he was leader and had more power.

She skipped out of the herb-den and toward the entrance where Night and Crisp waited. She joined them by touching noses with Night and giving a fake soft purr, as was the regulation. Night nodded at her, his amber eyes gleaming with appreciation.

She hated doing it, but she would be clawed if she didn't as she knew from experience. She knew she was luckier than some cats, Night always made sure she had food and kept the other toms at bay with his claws so she didn't have to deal with some flirty toms like other she-cats.

Though, she was well aware that the only reason why he kept her fed was so that she didn't look raggedy and that she was his, so he kept the toms away from his thing. *Whatever works, as long as I'm fed and don't have to deal with too many idiots, he can have his own reasons.*

She glanced up as Snake approached, the slick black tom had brown speckled fur and dark brown eyes that darted from side to side in a sly way. Crisp touched noses and purred, her eyes gave away no emotion.

But Rainstone glared venom as he turned to her with a smirk and ran his tail along her cheek. She wanted to bite it off, but Night beat her to it. Grabbing Snakes tail and thrusting it away from her.

"Snake, so good of you to join us," Night mewed coolly, drawing up to his full height so he could look Snake almost levelly in the eye.

Snake nodded, his eyes gave only a spark of respect to his leader's son. "Night, why don't you lead and show your little she-cat the way?" Snake suggested.

Rainstone growled silently, *Little!* Every cat called her 'little,' she wasn't that small! Even if she was only four moons old, she'd been training as long as Night and no cat called him little!

Crisp always said it was referring to her size, as she was a bit small for her age, and very small compared to the other trainees. She didn't care about that though, she wanted every cat to stop saying the same thing!

But her anger was forgotten as curiosity poured through her as Night ducked out through the hole, signaling for her to follow him. She stepped out, feeling the light spray of the small stream lightly wet her fur.

She forgot to breathe as she first took a look at her surroundings. The steep sloped, gravelly ground beneath her paws led down to a bright, green, grassy valley that was patched with trees and stony bare areas.

Around her, the mountains stretched up suddenly and arched around the valley, three peaks, almost perfectly distanced around the valley, stretched so high their peaks were lost in the clouds. She could see the sun, setting in between two of the peaks, it looked orange-red, not yellow as she had imagined.

The sky was dappled fiery red and orange with rays of rich gold staining the clouds. The breeze, fresher and warmer then the drafts in the cave, ruffled her whiskers and breathed on her fur.

She could see the green carpeted mountains, that gradually turned to pure stone the higher the mountain stretched. In the height of the warm season, everything seemed bursting with life and she caught a scent.

A scent familiar from the prey she ate, but even more tantalizing since it was alive. From far away, an eagle cried, its proud voice echoing around the valley as she watched it swirl in a circular pattern before suddenly diving downward and coming up with some small creature, perhaps a mouse, in its talons.

She'd studied all that in a moment and Night was looking at her with amusement. "Enjoying the fresh-air?" he mewed.

Rainstone was too excited to be angry at his superior tone and just nodded, her dark eyes shining. Night led her down the slope toward the valley and she skidded after him, being careful where she put her paws on the slope, since the ground crumbled away in some places.

Crisp and Snake caught up to them at the bottom of the slope and they padded onward, the she-cats at their mates side. Crisp showed her several plants, which Rainstone was able to distinguish because of their scent and leaves.

In fact, on the whole trip, the only thing she learned about the

herbs was how to find some of the roots which she wasn't able to tell by the plants so easily. She was disappointed when they turned back, she'd enjoyed memorizing the twisting paths through the sparse underbrush and the trails through the valleys, the routes forever imprinted on her mind.

She scrambled up the steep slope behind Night, narrowing her eyes as she struggled to keep pace with his much longer legs. She gasped as the dirt she was scrambling on started sliding down the hill, sand covering her paws and legs so that she couldn't move.

"Night!" she wailed, since Crisp and Snake had already gotten into the cave.

He glanced over his shoulder and his eyes widened in alarm as he saw her slipping down the hill, the rock and dirt pushing her onto her side as she struggled and flailed her paws to get a hold of something firm.

She lost sight of him as sand covered her eyes and she was buried in the sliding earth and she almost froze with panic as she realized that all her attempts to stand up was only making her slide faster.

Thinking fast, she stopped moving, choking on sand that filled her lungs as she breath. She stopped sliding and she carefully reached a paw down and touched firm rock. Quickly, she thrust her paws down on the rock and jumped out of the earth pile, gasping in clean air and coughing up the sand that had gotten into her throat.

Night was beside her, licking her chest to help the coughing and massaging her to stop her body from trembling. For the first time, she got the sense that Night *did* care for her as she looked in his worried eyes.

But she couldn't tell is he was scared for her, or if he was scared of losing his mate, his toy. She allowed him to carry her up the hill, her tail dragging the ground and she was too tired to protest.

Night set her down just before they got into the cave and Rainstone shook out her fur, shaking the worst of the sand and dirt out of her dark gray fur. Then she blinked and followed Night into the cave

just as the sun disappeared behind the mountains and the shadows lengthened.

Night escorted her to the Trainees den and went to get her some prey that the hunters had caught. She groomed her fur, guessing Night wouldn't appreciate her tracking sand into their nest.

She was glad no cat came to talk to her, Scamp and Squirrel passed her and went into the den with prey in their jaws with a friendly nod toward her. She had just finished cleaning her fur when Night came back with a mouse for her and a plump bird for himself.

She frowned, "What kind of bird is that?" she asked. She'd never seen a bird so small, the smallest birds she knew were jays.

"It's a finch, they're pretty rare here, but you can easily find them in the forests," Night mewed. Rainstone was glad that he didn't say anything about her asking him a question.

Curiosity pulled at her thought as she ate her mouse, "What's a forest?" she asked as she finished the mouse.

Night frowned, "Hmm, I don't really know, I think Fox said it's a place where there's a lot of trees, but I've never seen one," he shrugged then looked at her sharply. "But you're not supposed to ask questions," he grumbled, but he didn't make any move to cuff her. She wondered is he was too full to move.

"I don't see why not," Rainstone muttered under her breath.

She hadn't meant for Night to hear but he did. But surprisingly, he just shrugged as if he didn't know, "That's just the regulation on she-cats," he mewed, though she saw for a moment a flash of doubt in his eye.

Was that what he really believed? Or what he was trained to believe? Why did every cat think so much about rules and regulations? Why were they there in the first place?

Rainstone sighed, she was tired from her brief struggle with the mountain and she wanted to sleep, but she couldn't go to her nest until Night either gave her permission or took her to their nest.

Luckily for her, Night didn't seem in a mood to chat with his friends till moon-high like he sometimes did, and just nodded at them before heading to their nest with her trailing behind.

She curled down with him, she'd grown used to his warm flank and actually enjoyed the breath stirring her ear, it sparked some foolish excitement that made sleeping with Night tolerable.

...

Rainstone blinked open her eyes, she saw a dizzying swath of black sky. For a moment she didn't realize where she was when she'd fallen asleep in the Trainees den.

But when she blinked, the black sky seemed to change, slowly at first, but then faster, the sky was speckled with thousands of white specks of light. She gazed in wonder as a line of silver-blue stretched across the sky like stardust.

Then, before her eyes rose a glowing white ball. Moon, the name seared through her mind as she studied the uneven gray patches in the moon. Light fell on the night mountains, illuminating every object in its otherworldly glow.

That's where the silver light of night comes from, she thought, but how can I dream of something I didn't know? Confusion filled her, for she knew she was dreaming, but then the wind whispered around her, feathery soft in her ears with its gentle murmur.

"Listen to Song, watch the sky, never forget..." the wind murmured. Rainstone's confusion just grew, what song was she supposed to listen to? How could she watch the sky when she couldn't leave the cave without Night? Never forget what?

She wanted to demand an answer, but before she could, she was being shaken awake by a paw on her shoulder. Blinking open her eyes, the wondrous black and silver world disappeared and became just a memory. "Rainstone, I'm going out training," Night announced to her, as he did every morning.

Rainstone flicked her tail, "I don't suppose I can come with you?"

she grumbled.

Night shrugged, "No, sorry, but that's the-"

"I know, I know," she cut him off with a sigh, anticipating the claws she was sure to feel for interrupting him. "That's the rules and regulations."

Chapter 4: Knowing Better

Chapter 4: Knowing Better

Rainstone crouched under Night, curling around him while trying not to gag. He'd asked for her to do something different than grooming his fur, and since she'd seen other she-cats do this, she'd decided to give it a try.

What she hadn't realized when she started this was this is what cats do when they are getting ready to mate. She'd only realized after instinct had kicked in and she was feeling sick, but Night was enjoying it so she had to keep doing it, glad they were alone in the den.

She brushed her belly on Night's back and wound around him enticingly. She hated doing this, even though she didn't fully realize that she was seducing her mate.

"Hey!' a sharp voice called into the den. Rainstone jumped and turned to see Ice poking his muzzle into the den. "Is Tangle in here?" the pale silver tom asked, narrowing his eyes to peer at the moony-eyed tom behind her.

"A little young for seducing cats, aren't you?" Ice asked, his whiskers twitched with enticing amusement. For some reason Rainstone didn't understand, toms liked to be seduced.

Rainstone just shook her head to answer Ice's question. "He went out with Nightly," she mewed helpfully, speaking in a soft voice.

Ice purred, his pale blue eyes gleaming as he shook his head slowly and turned away. Rainstone turned back to Night who had recovered enough to look annoyed. "Why did you stop?" he complained, rolling over onto his back.

Rainstone twitched her tail, "Ice came in looking for Tangle," she responded. She looked at the fading dusk light that was seen at the

entrance. Her mind stirred as she remembered her dream half a moon ago, of swirling stars and the silver sun.

It made her body tingle with excitement stronger then the foolish tickling feeling she got with Night sometimes. Rainstone sighed and went back to rubbing her body on Night's. She stiffened as he suddenly grabbed her and forced her on the ground, her belly pressed to the ground and his belly smooth on her spine.

"Night!" she gasped, "We're not old enough yet!" she pleaded, she really didn't feel old enough to mate yet.

Night reluctantly got off of her, his amber eyes gleamed with anticipated excitement. Rainstone shrunk back against the wall as Night padded off, his fur twitching and his tail flicking.

Shivering, she realized she'd been holding her breath and she let it out in a long sigh, sinking into her nest that was warm from Night. She glanced up as Mudslide and Tangle padded into the den and curled into the two other nests, talking quietly with each other.

Scamp and Squirrel had left to complete their final training assignment, they'd be back in the next quarter moon. Rainstone couldn't wait to go on the assignment, *only half a moon now*, she reminded herself, excited by the prospect of getting away from the cave and being able to see the stars and moon in real life.

Her mother, Droplet, had never gone on the assignment, since she'd been born too long after Hawk to go with him, being only three moons at the time. But she'd be ready, she thought, ignoring the suggestive looks Mudslide kept giving her.

She relaxed as Night returned with some prey for them and settled down beside her, using his body to block the view of the other toms of her. Rainstone gladly ate the mouse, licking the last scraps from the muzzle as she did so.

She thanked Night for the meal, as she was required to do. And then curled down with Night, ready to go to sleep as the sounds of the main cave died down and the air turned cooler. Night was curled around her, his warm fur protecting her from the cold drafts,

but she still couldn't sleep.

She could almost hear the enticing sounds of the night sky calling her out. Lifting her head cautiously, she knew it was the middle of the night and every cat was sleeping soundly.

Not daring to breathe, she pulled herself out of Night's curled nest and waited a moment to see if he stirred, but he continued sleeping soundly. Excitement flashing at her paws of the prospect of breaking the rules, she padded silently to the ivy tangle where silver light flooded the small gap at the bottom of the curtain.

She glanced over her shoulder, not seeing the amber eyes gleaming at her from the shadows. She began to push her muzzle out of the cave, her heart begging to glimpse the night sky that she knew would not let down her expectations.

She saw a sole star, gleaming like white fire in a black void. Then she was pulled away, her shoulder jerked painfully as she was spun around to stare in shock into Night's eyes. "What are you doing?!" he hissed angrily.

Rainstone just stared in shock at Night. "Say something!" Night spat, she didn't see his claws, but felt them tear her ear and felt a warm liquid trickle down her cheek.

Rainstone narrowed her eyes, he wanted her to say something? Well then she'd give him an ear full of her thoughts! "You want me to say something?" she hissed softly, knowing to keep her voice down. "Then I'll tell you just exactly what I was thinking when I was with you earlier!" she spat.

Night's eyes flickered, her whispered venom had obviously startled him. "What are you talking about? You enjoyed that!" he mewed, his voice wavering uncertainly.

Rainstone didn't believe her ears. Did he really believe she liked being his pretty little toy? "What?! You really believe I actually like you?" she scoffed.

Night blinked. "Well, I had supposed," he swallowed before saying

anything else and he trembled slightly.

Rainstone was about to go on, but then a picture of Pepper's begging blue eyes appeared in her mind. She might be executed for what she was planning on saying. *Come on, Rainstone, you know better than this!*

She suddenly realized she'd been going about this situation wrong. She'd been playing the game the wrong way her entire life really. Instead of being abrasive and slowing herself down, play it right and run faster than any other cat. *Toms liked to be seduced, right? So why not use it?*

She suddenly purred softly, her purr like the muffled rolling of a stream. She sidled up to Night and brushed against his side, toms as lowly as these would be easy to take advantage of, as long as they think they're on top.

She ignored the doubt that by doing this she was stooping as low as them and was too young to do so, she wasn't planning on doing anything but using it to get away with things without being killed. And no other cat seemed to be bothered with her young age, so why should she?

Night had relaxed at her lovely purr and her caressing touch. "I was just kidding," she laughed gently in his ear, "I was just surprised," she murmured gently. "Why don't we go back to the den?" she suggested, her tone sleepy.

Night nodded, his eyes gleaming with a dreamy look. Half way to the den, Rainstone knew she wouldn't be able to act like this very often, she was ready to hurl from her actions.

I'll just use it when I'm in trouble, she promised herself, but for some reason, she felt now that she'd done it once, it'd be easier to do it by accident again later. The conflicted argument went on in her mind as she and Night curled back down, her trip to see the sky forgotten.

Its not right to use any cat like that! But they did it first. I'm too young to be thinking like this! It was the toms who made me grow up fast. I

thought I was better then this! No, you just know better.

She didn't get a wink of sleep that whole night, thinking about her actions and the possibility of repeating them. She must have dozed at dawn, because she jumped to her paws when Night got up for training.

"Did you have a bad dream?" Night ask gently. Rainstone wondered if he remembered what happened last night, or if he was in such a state he had thought it was dream.

She shook her head and stretched, her mouth gaping in a huge yawn. Crisp had stopped tutoring her since she knew everything, but she would need to go collect some more herbs later that day. "Night?' she called before he left, not bothering to make her voice soft.

He glanced over his shoulder, his eyes sparking with annoyance. "What?" he asked irritably.

"I need to collect more herbs later today, if you can manage," her voice had a scathing edge for the last part.

Night's eyes flashed with annoyance, "You know, in my dream last night, you were a perfect little dear!' he grumbled. "Yes, be ready just after sun-high," he mewed louder.

Rainstone flicked her tail to show she'd heard and sat down to groom her fur. By the time she was done, Mudslide and Tangle had left and she was alone in the dark den.

Stretching, she realized Night hadn't gotten her any food. Peaking her head out of the den, she saw a few toms clustered around the pile. She wasn't allowed to get her own food and only Night was allowed to give her food.

Ignoring her grumbling belly, she padded to the herb-den. The she-cats, Swirl and Grass, were in the den, checking their herbs. As the warm season closed, they'd need to stock up before frost destroyed everything until next warm season.

Rainstone had never talked to either of these cats, but she knew their relations, as she had been required as a she-cat. Grass was Tuft's mate, a pale gray she-cat with grass-green eyes, her brother was Nightly and she had a dead sister.

Swirl was a gray and black mottled she-cat with dark blue eyes that almost looked black, like Rainstone's. She was Swallowtail's mate and Boulder's sister, she had two kits in the fighters kit-den. They were almost five moons, being born around her own birth.

Rainstone ignored the she-cats that were chatting quietly and quickly looked at her herbs, pulling out a few shriveled leaves and berries that had spoiled. *I need more burnet, daisy leaves, comfrey root, and some more cobwebs*. Although cobwebs could be found at any time and she didn't need to stock up on them, she may as well grab more while she was out.

Putting the herbs back, she turned and padded out, still ignoring the two gossiping she-cats. She was met by Pepper, his eyes bright as he stood over her, being a little taller then her. "How are you this fine morning?" Pepper purred, escorting her back over to the outside of the Trainees den.

"Good, it could be worse I suppose," Rainstone answered, carefully drawing her paw over the small scratch Night had given her last night.

"I spoke with Night about being more lenient to your curiosity," Pepper mewed, sitting down beside her.

Rainstone nodded, "I suppose I can thank you for that, as Night didn't claw me when I asked what a forest was," she mewed, nodding at her brother.

Pepper purred, happy to know he'd helped. "How much longer till you two will finish your training?" he asked, he'd be starting his training around the time she finished hers, she knew he was sad they wouldn't be sharing a den.

Even after that, when Pepper became leader of the hunters and Night leader of the fighters, they'd each have their own private dens

to go to. Rainstone wondered when Night would become leader, would Crag retire? Or would Night have to wait until Crag died?

Rainstone shrugged, as a she-cat, that didn't concern her, no matter how much she wished it did. She tucked her tail tightly around her paws as her belly grumbled. She was really hungry, but Night wasn't back yet.

"Are you hungry?" Pepper asked, his eyes concerned.

Rainstone nodded reluctantly, "Night forgot this morning," she muttered, saying that made it sound like she was admitting that she was his!

"I'll go get you some," Pepper offered.

Rainstone shook her head, "I don't want you getting into trouble for me," she muttered.

"It'll be fine, see?" he mewed, sweeping his tail around the main cave. "There's hardly any cat around right now, I doubt any cat would notice," he mewed cheerily, his blue eyes sparkling.

Rainstone was too hungry to argue so she just nodded and watched Pepper get to his paws and trot to the prey-pile. He moved casually, only shooting a discreet look before grabbing a morsel of a hawk.

Rainstone purred as he trotted back, no cat had noticed. "Eat it quick!" Pepper encouraged. Rainstone wolfed it down in a few moments. It wasn't as filling as a regular meal, but it took the edge off her hunger.

She sat back, licking her whiskers and purring about the rule they'd just broke. "Well, that was fun," she purred.

Pepper laughed, "Yeah, well, I'm not going to make a habit of it!" he purred, nudging her shoulder gently.

She purred back, it was good, just sitting and talking with her brother, a cat that didn't judge her by her gender, didn't hold her to the unreasonable rules, just liked her for who she was. She scuffled her paws as she saw Snake pad past, his eyes twinkling suggestively

and his shoulder moving in a way that showed off his muscles more.

Rainstone rolled her eyes as he padded past and huffed. "Honestly, I thought I was too young to be appealing to a cat as old as him!" she snorted, her shoulder fur prickling with unease and anger.

Pepper laid his tail over her shoulder, the comforting touch calmed her and she sighed, stretching out onto her belly. She yawned, still tired from not sleeping last night, maybe she'd be able to catch a nap after her herb-collecting expedition.

She chatted awhile longer with Pepper before he went back to the nursery. She decided to go with him, she hadn't seen Storm's new kits yet, though they were almost a moon old now.

Slipping in after Pepper she instantly wished she hadn't come, she didn't want to be reminded that she should have still been in there, playing like a kit and not training yet.

She flexed her smooth muscles, they were more developed then they should have been and her fur was sleeker then Pepper's. *From eating prey sooner*, she thought, her tail twitching. She was glad Droplet wasn't there at the moment.

"Rainstone!" Whisper mewed happily, touching noses gently with her.

Rainstone purred and nudged her soft-spoken friend. "Are you excited to be almost a Trainee?" she asked as Whisper slipped to Pepper's side. Pepper looking down at her gently and Whisper looking up with admiration.

"I can hardly wait,' Whisper breathed, still gazing at Pepper. *As if you don't spend enough time together already*, she thought in annoyance, flicking her tail.

"I just came to see the new kits, but if you're two are too busy..." she trailed off and Whisper snapped her gaze back to her with a mixture of guilt and embarrassment.

"Sorry, Rainstone!" Whisper apologized, slipping from Pepper's side. "Come see them!" Whisper invited. "They're adorable!"

Rainstone joined her at the side of Storm's nest. Peering in, she saw three sleeping kits. Two she-kits and a tom. "They're Stick, Sandy, and Frost," Whisper told her.

Rainstone matched the names pretty easily. The tom, no doubt, was Stick, a lanky brown tom. Sandy was probably the pale ginger tabby she-kit. And Frost, undoubtedly, was the silver she-kit with white tabby stripes.

Rainstone nodded, the warm smell of milk and Storm's loving gaze on her kits was making her mind fuzzy, and she needed to go meet Night anyways. "They're lovely," she mewed curtly.

Then she nodded quickly and bounced out of the den, hurrying over to the ivy curtain and quickly smoothed down her pelt, waiting impatiently for Night. The black tom appeared a few moments later, his amber eyes were sparking with excitement and his fur twitched.

"Guess what!" Night purred.

"What?" Rainstone asked, her ear twitching impatiently.

"I found out that we'll be able to take the final assessment before Tangle!" Night purred, his eyes gleaming. Rainstone nodded, she'd suspected as much, since she was Hawk's daughter and Night was Crag's son. Though she'd half hoped Tangle would be able to make the assessment first so that she could have a little more time to grow, she still wasn't even the size of half a full grown cat.

She glanced at Tangle, he was lashing his tail with annoyed impatience. He'd have to wait a half moon since only one pair of cats could do the assessment at a time. Rainstone angled her ears toward the outside, reminding Night what they were doing.

Night nodded, too happy at the moment to think her implied order was a question to his superiority. Rainstone sighed and shook her head, how could the toms think so little of what the rules meant? Did they just not think to much about it because it would be

incontinent to them?

Why couldn't some she-cat stand up to them? *Because they have all the power, she-cats don't know how to hunt or fight, we'd be destroyed*, a tiny voice whispered, Rainstone just sighed, annoyed with her pessimistic thoughts, and followed Night out.

Once she glimpsed the outside she relaxed and she remembered trying to see the sky last night. *What does it look like at night? Does it look like my dream?* she wondered, curiosity biting impatiently at her paws.

But she focused on padding in a zigzag pattern down the slope as Night had told her to do until she was older. Or more specifically, bigger, when she'd have the strength to fight the slipping soil. Night's black tail waved sleekly in front of her. For the moment, she could forget all her misgivings and despise toward him and just relax being on a stroll with a cat she knew.

She padded to his shoulder as they padded through the green grass, some of the green stalks brushing as high as her chin. The few crocked trees cast delicate leaf patterns on the ground. Rainstone pointed her muzzle over to a feathery willow tree.

Padding beneath the dome shaped branches, she glanced at Night as he padded over to her, his eyes shone with curiosity. "What are you looking for here?" he asked curiously.

"Comfrey root, good for broken bones," she responded, opening her jaws to breath in the tangy smell of the flower. The flower had large leaves with small flowers, these flowers were purple, but they could be pink or white.

"Just broken bones?" Night asked as she began digging in the moist soil for the root.

"No," she mewed, "They can also be used to soothe wounds, help wrenched claws, sprains, or itching," Rainstone mewed around the black roots as she pulled them up, dirt speckling her muzzle. "But they work best on broken bones," she mumbled.

Night nodded his eyes warm as he gazed at her. Rainstone blinked, did he really love her? But if he did, why claw and scratch her? *Does he really not know any better?* The thought thrummed through her mind, along with what she'd done last night, using his emotions to her advantage.

Guilt made her ears hot at how low she'd stooped and she followed Night with a cloud of thoughts in her mind. *Toms may not know any better, but I do, and if I want to be better then them, then that means acting like them. I guess that's the inconvenience of knowing better.*

Chapter 5: First Glimpse

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Rainstone yawned and rolled over, her flank pressing against Night's side. Early morning light filtered into the den from the entrance, pale and clean. She pricked her ears as she heard murmuring outside, curiosity pulsed through her paws, tugging at her to go see.

But she couldn't as long as Night was still asleep, her vague curiosity wasn't as strong as Night's claws. Besides, she could guess what they were talking about. This morning Pepper, Whisper, Cliff, and Tinge would become Trainees and she and Night would begin on their final assessment journey around the mountains.

Energy and excitement throbbed through her like her heartbeat and she could almost see the night sky and taste the stars on her tongue. *Its so close in reach!* Closing her eyes, she remembered her dream of inky black sky and dancing stars through the endless night.

Energy made her want to get up and dash around in a circle like a kit, but that would disturb Night and she'd get in trouble. Instead, she contented herself with an eccentric tail lash, avoiding Night's face of course.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, savoring the voice her mind replayed, like the fading echoes around the mountains that one can keep hearing for a long time. *Listen to Song, watch the sky, never forget...*

A moon after hearing it, she was still no closer to figuring it out, but it called her forward, gave her promise of something more, made her feel less alone... Again she listened to it, the smooth ancient rasp of the voice and the knowing lilt to the words, like the nostalgic tone of a very old cat.

"Rainstone?" Night mumbled, rolling onto his back and blinking

sleepy amber eyes at her.

"Yes?" Rainstone murmured, nudging him gently, too excited to be anything more then slightly annoyed that she had to play nice with him.

"Are you ready to start today? An entire half-moon away from the cave..." Night mewed, a smirk playing on his face.

Rainstone heart fluttered like a trapped bird at the thought of leaving for a half-moon, not having any cat telling her what to do or what not to do... "I can hardly wait," she breathed with a purr, helping Night groom his pelt before the ceremony.

Even though it was hardly dawn, she could hear many cats out in the main cave already. Mudslide was the only other cat in the den, curled up in a tight ball, just a heap of dark brown tabby fur, with the splash of black on his paws.

Rainstone relaxed and purred, right now, with Night softly snoring as he started falling back to sleep and Mudslide looking so innocent, she could almost imagine they were all just happy in life. *But that won't happen unless something changes...*

Grooming her dark bluish gray fur down, she shook it out, catching the blue tinge at the edge of her vision as a stray ray of sunlight hit her. "Are you ready?" Crag asked, pocking his head into the den to stare at Night.

"Completely," Night responded with a nod, Crag nodded back, pride flashing in his eyes.

Rainstone followed Night out and he led her through the throng of cats to the front where Pepper and Whisper sat, Cliff and Tinge besides them with Sleet not far off. Rainstone frowned and leaned toward Pepper.

"What's Sleet doing here?" she murmured in his ear.

"Tinge will become his mate, she was too young when he became a Trainee, and he wanted to wait until she was six moons before she became his mate," Pepper murmured back, shooting a sharp glance

at Sleet. "So that he could mate with her right off," he grumbled.

Rainstone shivered, she still felt much too young to mate, but the idea was less of a shock now that she was five moons. She stood a step behind Night, her head was still only to his shoulder so he blocked most of her view, but she studied Cliff and Tinge besides her, she hadn't seen them much before, only Cliff really.

Cliff was a gray tom with brown paws and blue eyes, with a body very much like Swallowtail, his father, with a longer tail and larger ears then most other cats. Tinge had the same body, a bit more slender, catachrestic for a she-cat, but her fur was white with gray tinged ends that made her look fuzzy, though her yellow eyes were sharp in contrast.

Rainstone listened with a half an ear as Pepper and Whisper became mates and Trainees while Cliff became a trainee and Tinge became Sleet's mate. Her other senses were all focused on the ivy curtain and what laid behind the cave's mask.

"Night, Rainstone!" Crag and Hawk called them forward. Rainstone stepped after Night and stood in front of her father. She hadn't spoken to him in three moons, all but ignoring him and her mother as a Trainee.

But she searched his face earnestly now, looking for pride and happiness, but his eyes were expressionless. Rainstone felt bitter disappointment throb through her for a moment, like she'd accidentally bitten down on a yarrow stem.

But then it was gone and Crag was ordering her and Night out on their journey. Night dipped his head respectfully to the two leaders and touched noses with Crag as was custom.

Rainstone dipped her head low, hiding her resentment, and then briefly brushed Crag's muzzle, but she paused at her father and looked up into his eyes, allowing a moment of sadness.

"Sorry I couldn't make you proud," she breathed, just loud enough for his ears alone. Hawk blinked, Rainstone thought she saw a glimmer of guilt in his eyes, but then she turned after Night and

pushed her father out of her mind.

She ignored the fixed pairs of eyes on her as she padded to the edge of the cave where the ground broke away on the steep slope. Night halted and glanced at her, blinking his amber eyes at her, for the first time she could remember, he looked nervous.

Why? He knows how to fight, and basic hunting techniques, I'm the one who doesn't know how to fend for myself! She thought with a prickle of impatience. She gave him a small nod of encouragement though and he nodded back, his eyes grateful as he turned and padded out of the cave.

Rainstone followed, glad her legs were long enough and her paws were strong enough to get her down the slope in a controlled walk. Night didn't say anything as he led her down to the valley.

"So, where do we start?" she asked, staring around at the three peaks, they had to get to the top of each one.

Night frowned and looked around, not rebuking her for asking a question. "Where do you think?" he asked, looking dazed at the amount of ground they had to cover in such a short time. But Rainstone wasn't sympathetic, was he not even the least bit excited? She was so excited she wanted to dash over to the mountains and start climbing them right away!

"What about there?" she mewed, pointing her tail at the second furthest peak away. They would then cross the furthest peak on their way to the last peak and would thus be the easiest route. Having the shorter length to go at the end of the journey.

Night nodded, looking relived, "We can probably get just above the base of the mountain before sunset," he mewed, sounding more confident. So they started out, the sun to their backs as they began, padding paw-step by paw-step closer to the peak.

By sun-high, Rainstone was beginning to tire and fell behind Night. She had eaten only a small shrew before they set out and her mouth was dry and tasted of dust. "Can we take a break?" she mewed in a complaining tone.

She half-expected a scratch for her complaint, but Night just nodded and stretched, shaking his black fur. "There's a little grove over there with a small pool," he mewed. "We only just passed the border though," he added.

Rainstone happily flopped down on the warm stone by the edge of the pool, lapping the water up until her mouth and throat was wet. Flicking the droplets off her whiskers, she dabbed her paw in the pool, watching the ripples, the water gleaming in the sunlight. She pricked her ears as a shadow flitted beneath her paws.

She glanced up as Night crashed through the long grass behind her, a rabbit in his jaws and distracting her from the evasive shadow. It was smaller then some, but was still a filling meal for the both of them. Rainstone yawned and stretched out on her belly with her paws dangling over the pool, the sun warm on her back.

She yawned and closed her eyes, the lazy hum of bees in her ears and the lapping sound of Night grooming his fur soothed her so that she dozed on and off until Night nudged her. "We need to keep moving," he mewed.

Rainstone yawned and purred as she rolled onto her back, scratching her pelt on the warm rock. "Okay, " she murmured, yawning again as she stared at him through narrowed eyes.

Night purred, was she imagining it or was Night more relaxed then in the cave? "You know," he mewed, "You're acting different then in the cave, more relaxed," he purred softly, as if reading her thoughts.

Rainstone blinked up at him, "So are you. And is it any wonder? If I let the wrong word slip out I could be killed!" she snorted angrily.

Night shifted his paws uneasily, as if he didn't want to discuss the subject, and Rainstone got a first glimpse of what the rules meant to Night. He didn't like them, but he went along with them and tried not to think of it too hard because then his conscience would be too much.

Pepper thinks of it, and he's not afraid. Rainstone thought gloomily. But she just shrugged and followed Night, padding at his side as

they continued through the unfamiliar grass that would suddenly become gray stone and then soft, short grass, before turning stony again.

They padded mostly in silence, Night kept checking their position and Rainstone let her mind wander as she studied the unfamiliar land they padded through, anything from meadows to rock fields. As the sun began sinking ahead of them, they'd reached the first mountain.

Rainstone craned her neck to see the top and studied the mountain. It was the second tallest mountain, starting out wide at the bottom and growing narrower as it got higher, its top looked like a round flat, table, as if a giant paw had swiped the top off.

"We should start climbing it, its not dusk yet," Rainstone mewed.

Night sighed, "I was afraid you'd say that," he sighed, but he took the lead and led her up a winding thin path. They zigzagged up the mountain, slipping between fallen boulders and leaping up stretches of steep rock.

They made quick work, getting up the first bit of mountain, where it flattened out to a mini valley with running water, just after sunset. "There! We can rest here for the night," Rainstone puffed, her legs trembling from the effort of leaping up the last bit which had been almost a cliff edged rock.

Night nodded, looking content to be done, too exhausted to complain at her commanding tone. Rainstone realized how natural it felt to command. "Night, why don't you go catch us some prey and I'll make us a nest and find some shelter," she mewed crisply, padding over to sniff at a cave made by fallen rocks.

This'll do, she thought as Night padded off to find some prey. Rainstone went to the small stream that ran down the mountain and found some moss on the rock. With practiced ease, she clawed the moss up with sharp, controlled movements.

She shook the moisture out and brought it back to the cave, making a large makeshift nest, warm with plenty of moss. She sat back,

Night wasn't back yet and the shadows were growing, the bright world had turned so quickly to one of shadows as the sun abruptly disappeared behind the mountain they sat on.

Her heartbeat sped up as she looked at the sky, it was darkening, indigo with flashes of orange and milky yellow. Her eyes fixed on one bright star that was visible. She held her breath, her eyes fixed on the star so that all she was aware of was the roaring blood in her ears and the wind that tugged at her fur, urging her to just let go. To just run away.

Her paws itched to leave, to leave it all behind and never look back. But she knew in her heart she couldn't, she didn't know how to take care of herself and she couldn't leave Pepper, he'd be heartbroken if he thought she was dead!

But it was so tempting... Night would never see her again and she'd never have to do anything she didn't want to. She'd have everything she'd ever dreamed of.

"Hey! I found plenty of prey!" Night's pleased call shook her out of the trance and she tore her eyes away from the star and felt her thoughts smothered down. Of course it was impossible to leave, but she knew the thought would never quite leave her.

She ignored the pricking at her paws as she ate a mouse while Night tucked into a jay. Personally, she didn't like the tough meat of the small creatures, she preferred meat to be more soft, with a different tang then what the hunters would bring back.

She hesitated as Night called her to the den she'd made. She wanted to watch as more and more stars appeared as night took over the sky. She really wanted to see the moon, she could see its glow, hiding behind the mountain across from her, evading her peering eyes.

"Rainstone!" Night's persistent call, growing an edge of impatience made her get up and pad over to him and curl down besides him, his larder black fur blocking her view of the sky.

She was too tired to fight sleep and she fell back into the dizzying

torrent of dreams that came from an exciting day, they came in flashes and left before she knew what they meant.

...

Rainstone jerked awake and leaped to her paws, fur on end and eyes staring into blackness as a crashing rumbling sound made the ground beneath her paws tremble and made her freeze with fear.

Shivering, she padded to the entrance where Night sat, his ears flattened against his head against the sound as his amber eyes peered into the hissing, black rain. Rainstone jumped as a flash of light seared across the sky, lighting the cave up enough for her to see Night's fur was bushed out.

The light was followed by a crashing rumble. "What is it?" she asked, her voice trembling with fear as her heart beat heavily in her chest.

"Thunder, and lighting, I've never seen it before, but Boulder told me its pretty rare here and they're only in the warm season. He also said they can be very dangerous," Night mewed in a low voice, his ears strained to hear the thunder.

Rainstone felt better now that she knew what it was, but she didn't want to go back to sleep. Not that she could, with all that noise sending her heart jumping at every pounding crash or blinding flash. She dozed off as dawn neared, her head on Night's slumped shoulder and his tail curled around her protectively.

She never saw how gently he had stared at her, how protective he was of her. How sorry that this way of life was better then the life in the cave, knowing that he would never be able to make her happy. His heart ached as much as hers. But he felt trapped. As a leader's son and future leader, he was stuck until he was leader, then maybe... just maybe... he and Pepper could make a change.

But when Rainstone awoke, he didn't say that, if he did, it might give her the courage to do something stupid before he was ready to live up to his words. Rainstone yawned and stretched, oblivious to the conflicted feelings in Night, but she had already caught a first

glimpse of his views and she could hold on to them even when there was nothing else left.

Rainstone shook out her fur, grooming the unruly fur as she looked up at the sky. With dawn the worst of the rain had moved on and she only saw a few flashes of light beyond the mountain ridge along with a few echoing rumbles of thunder that rolled to her ears and thrummed around her, speeding her heart up.

"Are we going to set out soon?" she mewed through a yawn, studying Night, he looked oddly perplexed, his eyes flashing with thoughts like the shadow that flitted under the water.

Night nodded and rolled his muscles, his eyes closing as he relaxed into a luxurious stretch. "I'll go find us some prey and then we'll set off, we definitely need to get to the top of the peak before evening," he mewed.

"You think it'll take all day?" Rainstone asked, they'd made it quite far yesterday.

Night nodded, "We'll be hitting some tricky spots, especially after the rain last night," he mewed. "I'll be right back though, so don't go anywhere," he mewed as he exited the den.

Rainstone fluffed out her fur, she hated feeling useless. She sat down with a bump, her tail lashing as she leaned outside the den. It was still sprinkling, the rain splashing on her muzzle, cooling her temper as it cooled her face.

She sighed and closed her eyes, just relishing in the clean cold rain. She scented Night before she heard him. "Hey, I found a mouse for the each of us," Night's mew was muffled and Rainstone could smell the musky scent of mouse.

She grabbed the mouse from Night's jaws, her muzzle softly brushing his. She padded into the small cave to avoid setting the mouse in the mud and Night slipped in beside her. They ate in silence, Night bothered by his own thoughts and Rainstone's wandering to the days journey.

What will the top of the peak be like? What is so special about these peaks that they're so important to our cats? Her mind imagined that maybe there would be something special up there that they would find up on the top...

She was panting before long as they left the small valley ledge behind, her short legs straining to continue climbing up the steeply sloped and twisting path. "Can we take a break?" she panted, flopping down on a twisted, exposed root of an old, crooked tree.

Night nodded, sitting down with his head down, getting his breath back as Rainstone closed her eyes and just focused on how relived her legs felt now that they weren't working. All too soon Night was padding away and she had to scramble after him.

They traveled in silence the whole day, too tired and out of breath as they tried to keep their footing on the slick slope, wet from the rain. Rainstone's legs trembled as the sun passed sun-high and began sinking down the sky.

She had never been so exhausted and there was still the hardest part left. Just above where they stood, the mountain turned suddenly from sparse forest and tuff grass to solid rock, slick and steep, just a few crumbled pathways up to the top.

But she refused to complain or even voice the doubt she felt that her legs would make it up the difficult trail. Her pride wouldn't allow her, even if she was sure she'd die on this journey, it was her pride that kept her silent.

Night's shoulders hunched as he dug his paws firmly into the stone ground and flattened his ears in determination. Rainstone followed him, glad that puffy white clouds had covered the sun, even though they promised more rain on the brisk breeze that carried them. At least she didn't have the glare of the sun reflecting off the stone to distract her.

Her paws slipped and scuffled as she pulled herself up paw-step by careful paw-step. Night gave her his tail to grab onto as they trekked in a patch of ground where the ground crumbled away in sharp cliffs. Any cat unlucky enough to step on a broken piece of

land would tumble down the steep rock, so far that they probably wouldn't survive the fall.

She gasped as the ground under on of her paws slipped away. She jumped away from it before she could stumble and padded forward, her eyes wide, ears pricked with alertness, and her tail bushed out to twice its normal size.

Finally, they made it to the top. Night bounded the last few tail-lengths ahead of her, leaving her to scramble up the last boulder by herself. She puffed as she leaped up it, her forelegs hitting the top while her back claws scraped at the stone, trying to push herself up.

With a massive heave, she managed the roll herself up and laid panting on her back for a moment before padding slowly up the last bit of trail. She let out a huge sigh of relief as she stopped at the very top, the top was a perfectly round table-top, as she'd noted from below.

It fell away steeply from all sides except for the narrow trail which they'd climbed. It wasn't too big, about as long as the cave had about the same width as length, completely bare of anything but one sedge bush. She spotted Night, standing with his ears pricked and his amber eyes wide and sparkling with excitement.

Wondering what had made him forget about his weariness, she padded to the edge and turned to look down the mountain toward the valley. Her breath was gone and her paws felt rooted into place as her eyes drank in the dazzling sight.

The valley, like a spot of green grass on a stone landscape, seemed brighter by contrast to the dull rock. The slim stream wound through it like a silver snake, shining and slipping along its chosen path.

The other mountain peaks arched over the valley, like a mother leaning protectively over their kit. Their dark green and gray coats looking warm and soft while the hard stone muscles stayed, unmoving, ready to protect their nest if danger came along.

But a whispering in the back of her mind tore Rainstone's gaze

away from the safe valley to look the other way, into the unknown.

The other side of the mountain had not a speck of green, a few sparse brown bushes dotted the harsh and spiky cliffs and peaks that rolled on forever. But for some reason, the harsher landscape brought a larger sense of home and curiosity then the safe and peaceful valley.

The harsh cry of an eagle echoed off the rocks and the wild scent of the wind the blew over the sharp stone filled her mouth and made her hungry for more as it whistled in her ears. For a heartbeat, she thought she saw in the horizon, just a small shadow in front of the gray light of the setting sun behind the clouds, the outline of a cat that whisked out of sight before she could study it.

Rainstone blinked, Night seemed content to look over his home, a sense of purpose and warmth filled him as he resolved to spend all his fighting skill on protecting his home. But Rainstone, she'd caught a first glimpse of something more, something larger, something she couldn't quite comprehend.

But somehow, without fully realizing it, she knew, just *knew*, that thousands of lives went on beyond their valley, others better then hers, others worse. But all were a fresh chance for striking at a new legacy.

Chapter 6: Taste Of Freedom

Chapter 6: Taste of Freedom

They traveled without stopping for the next three days. One day to get down the mountain peak, one day to pad across the mountain ridge, and another day to climb up the next mountain, having to stop just past half-way up the mountain because of the tricky path and dark shadows of night.

Rainstone licked her paw, rasping her tongue over the torn raw flesh. Days of trekking over stone had resulted in all her soft paws being torn. She glanced at Night, he was checking around the small, slanted clearing on the side of the mountain.

They'd decided to make their den under a sparse bush that would offer only some cover on the bare stone slope. Ever since the thunderstorm a few nights ago the air had been cold in the morning and there was frost on the stone every morning.

The ice tinged wind, although worried Night, excited Rainstone. She liked to look at the intricate patterns of frost on the stone in the morning before the sun came up and stole it away. She glanced at Night, weariness pulling at her eyelids.

"Lets go to the den," Night mumbled through a yawn. Rainstone nodded, her tail dragging behind her as she plodded to the bush, she'd been unusually tired for the past day. She peered at the uncrossed territory beyond the mountain they were on before ducking under the fronds of the bush.

Ever since she'd first laid eyes on it she could hardly keep her eyes away long enough to watch where she was putting her paws. That distraction was to be thanked for the cut on her leg she'd received after she slipped down the mountain and cut it on a rock while trying to stop herself from sliding down any further.

But she was exhausted now and gladly curled up beside Night,

letting the voice of the ancient cat lull her mind to sleep with untold promises and hopes.

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The next day dawned cold and gray as she struggled to pull her eyes open. Clouds had rolled in during the night on a chilly mountain breeze, though there was no brooding scent of rain. Rainstone shook out her fur as Night sat up, his eyes blinking in confusion for a moment before understanding and intelligence filled him again.

She shivered at the icy tang as the wind blew with full forth through the sparse bush, though it failed to clear her foggy mind. Shaking the bush and scratching her fur. She jumped out to avoid being scratched anymore and Night followed her, licking a paw and drawing it over his ear as he narrowed his eyes against the blustery wind.

"Still like the wind?" he muttered to her, shivering and fluffing up his fur, though the wind still sliced right through it.

Rainstone nodded, even though she was shivering and yawning. "I like the taste of it," she mewed, breathing in the wind that rushed into her mouth.

Night snorted, "And what does it taste like?" he grumbled, pulling a twig out of his fur.

Rainstone breathed in the wild dry taste of the wind with consideration. It sent her heart thumping fast in her chest and her ears were pricked forward and she was fully alert for the moment as it rushed around her, bringing distant sounds and scents of faraway places to give her a taste of them.

"It tastes like freedom," she murmured quietly, her eyes staring at nothing as the wind buffeted her.

Night stopped at that and stared at her, his amber eyes glistened with sadness for a moment before they darkened again. "Of course it does," he mewed solidly before stretching his legs.

"Lets get moving, we can find some food on the way, but if it does

start raining, I don't want to be stuck on the top of a mountain," Night mewed with an ill-tempered flick of his tail.

Rainstone didn't bother to point out that the wind didn't smell of rain. Night knew that, he was just finding an excuse to be annoyed. Rainstone just shrugged and followed him, she wanted to see the other side of the mountain again, a full view, not the glimpses she got as they padded up the mountain.

Rainstone had gotten used to the exhausting work of climbing around the mountain. But this one was steeper then the last, more like a pointed spire whose top was lost in the clouds. The mountain was pure stone as well, not carpeted with grass or trees like the other two mountains.

She gritted her teeth and dug in her sleepy paws which she couldn't wake up, struggling to keep up with Night's longer legs as she raced after him, her head so dizzy from tiredness she could have tumbled down the mountain and wouldn't have known the difference.

"Can we take a break?" she gasped, they'd been traveling for what seemed like a long time. It must have been past sun-high, they hadn't eaten, and the ground kept getting steeper. She couldn't feel the wind anymore, her body was numb with cold and exhaustion and she rocked on her paws as she stopped moving.

Night looked back at her, his eyes were tired, but no where close to the exhaustion she was feeling. She could see his eyes grew alarmed as he looked at her, as if he could see how exhausted she felt.

Rainstone held onto his eyes, all she could see were those two amber pools that moved closer to her. When she blinked, she couldn't feel anything but herself being pulled backward by an invisible force and her legs crumpled as she slid backward.

Stone scratched her legs, but teeth grabbed her scruff before she slid far and she was lifted entirely off the ground, just her tail dragging. Her mind reeled but she couldn't grasp what had just happened or open her eyes to see, she felt like there was a heavy stone on her chest, making it difficult to breathe.

Then she felt flat stone beneath her paws and water splash against her muzzle. *Is it raining?* her tired mind wondered, but this was the rhythmic splashing of a stream. As water made its way to wet her tongue, her mind began to clear and the stone shifted, allowing her to breathe more.

Stretching her eyes open with effort, she saw she was lying on some flat stone high in the mountain, for clouds wreathed around them, and a trickling stream, no more then a tail-length wide, splashed besides her muzzle.

Night stood over her, worry clear in his anxious movements and he breathed a sigh of relief as she opened her eyes and raised her head. "I thought something was terribly wrong, you got tired faster then usual, and then you just blacked out..." Night burst out then trailed off, his voice edging with fear.

Rainstone flicked her ear, suddenly aware of how dark it was, and that the faint light came from the west, as if it was already dusk... "How long was I out?" she mumbled anxiously, trying to steady her mind and heart..

"Most of the day," Night admitted, scuffling his paws. Rainstone blinked, it felt like she'd only just fallen backwards!

"I'm so sorry!" Rainstone burst out, struggling to sit up. "I didn't meant to do that," she mewed sheepishly, more embarrassed for collapsing so easily then putting them about a day behind where they wanted to be.

"Don't worry," Night soothed, stroking her shoulder with his tail. "We'll only just below the peak, we'll finish the climb tomorrow, its more important for you to rest, we can't have you collapsing again," Night mewed, frowning.

"What's wrong?" Rainstone asked, not missing the guilty look in his eyes.

Night shuffled his paws, "Well, there's a small rule I had passed over for you," he muttered.

Rainstone's ears pricked. "What rule?" she growled, her fur pricking with uneasiness.

"Its about the assignment, a cat is only supposed to go on it if they're at least eight moons, so you should have stayed back at the cave while I did this alone, because its so difficult," he muttered, flattening his ears. "I'm sorry I made you come along," he muttered.

Oh, so I'm three moons younger then I should have been, no wonder why its so hard when Cinder said it was pretty easy. Though, why should this matter if it didn't matter for me becoming a Trainee? I was three moons young then too, she thought with annoyance, then turned back to what Night had said.

"Sorry,'..." Rainstone echoed, remembering the apology. "Are you feeling all right?" she purred and he looked up, his eyes confused. "I don't think you've ever apologized for making me do things I didn't want to do," Rainstone swept on, ignoring his confusion.

Night shifted his paws. "I know, but it would be easier if you followed the rules!" he complained in a whine.

Rainstone couldn't stop the flush of anger and she jumped to her paws. "If the rules weren't so unfair I'd follow them!" she hissed.

Night waved his tail in a calming motion. "I didn't make the rules, but I'm bound to follow the rules, for now at least," he mewed, a glint coming to his eyes and Rainstone pricked her ears.

"What do you mean?" she pressed.

But Night looked unwilling to speak. "It doesn't matter, later is not now," he grumbled.

Rainstone sighed, she was to tired to get anything more out of him, she just wanted to go back to sleep, so she closed her eyes, curled down, and started to dream.

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Rainstone dreamt she stood on stone, she could feel the smooth cold rock beneath her paws. But darkness flowed around her, she could

feel it, like warm water swallowing her whole.

She looked around, trying to see something other then pure blackness. She pricked her ears as a whisper whistled around her ears. *"Listen to Song, watch the sky, never forget... Listen to Song,"* the voice repeated itself and she looked around for the speaker, but she could see nothing.

She pricked her ears as a humming sound chirped around her, rising and falling in melody. *A song? Listen to song? This song?* She tried to separate the words that hummed in a rolling voice of the same raspy ancient voice that whispered in her ears.

But the words were lost, her ears catching nothing like a piece of prey disappearing beneath her claws. Growing steadily agitated and uneasy, the voice dropped away and for a heartbeat there was a flash of gray in front of her eyes, the black silhouette of a cat in front of her was all she saw, the only color was narrowed dark amber eyes.

"*Ancestors*," the voice echoed through her mind, though she didn't hear it through the ears, it just seared through her mind as if placed there. She frowned, what did 'ancestors' mean? What were ancestors? Questions bubbled through her, but the voice had disappeared and so had the warm blackness pressing her sides, she was alone.

"*No, never alone*," the voice reached her ears once more and in a blinding flash the sky was illuminated by silver, blue, and black, all whirling around together like the stream and the white glowing moon centered right above her, filling her eyes with its beauty.

She held her breath, her eyes held on to it for a moment longer as it gradually faded to blackness, but she thought she saw the silhouette and amber eyes once more before she blinked and woke up to foggy gray light.

She shivered, even though Night's warm black fur kept the chilly air from reaching her bones. Her paws were damp and her fur was bristling as she looked around the bare gray rock, though all she saw was black and blue sky with silver and white stars and moon.

The air was calm, heavy clouds wreathed around her and the air felt damp, she guessed that was why her fur felt wet. *What happens if it rains while we're in a cloud?* She wished she knew because at the moment she didn't really want to be wet and cold.

Night, woken by her movement, sat up and stretched his jaws in a yawn, his ears pinning back and his eyes closing as he rubbed his bleary eyes with a paw. "How are you feeling?" Night asked, his eyes were clear, and Rainstone wondered if he ever had dreams like hers, or if her dreams were for her alone.

"I feel great!" she purred, feeling a trickle of warmth as Night gently touched her ear with his nose. It was true, and not just from the unspeakable dream she had, she really did feel stronger then yesterday when she'd woken up.

"Good, I wish I could hunt, but I haven't seen anything since we left the forest two days ago, we'll have to get there tonight," he mewed, frowning. Now that he'd mentioned it, she realized how hungry she was, her belly tight and invisible talons clawing at her belly.

"Come on," Night encouraged, though he must have seen her doubt, "The sooner we get moving the sooner we'll get to the prey!" he mewed, jumping to his paws.

Rainstone jumped after him as he padded up the stony trail, not bothering to shake out her sleep-ruffled fur. Her paws padded confidently up the tricky terrain, it wasn't as difficult as she'd thought, but she still had to take longer then Night while scrambling up the boulders that were strewn across the path.

Before long they emerged from the clouds and Rainstone felt as if they'd climbed right into the purple dawn sky. Her eyes grew wide as she stared around at the wide sky, a few stars remained on the darker corner of the sky, the side they were in.

On the other side though, the rising sun was just appearing, the first orange rays breathing warmth on her cold fur. Below, the clouds billowed, blocking everything below them, even the other mountain peaks were hidden.

She turned and looked into the unknown the sharp grey peaks were shadowed in darkness, calling her to explore the mysterious depths. The first rays of sunlight touched the tallest craggily peaks, turning the gray stone pink.

She purred in happiness, she wanted nothing more then to watch the mountains like this, but something wasn't quite right... It didn't feel quite like home, as if she wasn't entirely welcomed anywhere but the unfriendly mountains that no cat had ever padded on.

She turned and saw Night, sitting un the top of the peak, it was no larger then three tail-lengths all the way around, the slimmest of the spires for the peaks. His amber eyes were warm, "You really like it here, don't you?" he purred, his eyes darkening, "You don't like the cave," he sighed.

Rainstone blinked, it was true, she'd be happy to stay here forever, never going back to the cave to deal with all the troubles that laid there. "No, I don't like the cave, but I don't have much choice," she sighed, a long relentless sigh.

Night sighed as well, he had always known Rainstone wasn't happy, but she'd have to deal with it until he could do something to possibly change everything, he hoped she wouldn't do anything that would get her killed, especially since he would be the one to end up doing the killing.

"Listen... Rainstone," Night mewed awkwardly, Rainstone blinked, he looked perplexed, then again, he'd often looked perplexed on the journey.

"Can I make a deal with you?" he asked, Rainstone stared at him and shifted her paws uneasily.

"What kind of deal?" she asked warily, sweeping her tail around her, she hoped he wasn't going to ask her to mate with him.

Night sighed, "If I promise that when Pepper and I become leaders we change things, will you promise to follow the rules until then?" Night asked, his amber eyes begging her to agree.

Rainstone swallowed, she wanted things to change, but she could wait that long? Would she even make it to then? "I-I'll try my best," she mewed, though her heart wasn't in the promise, her heart lay in the night sky, in forbidden desires.

Night blinked, he didn't look thoroughly convinced, but he nodded. "But I need one promise from you," Rainstone mewed, stepping forward boldly, even though she had to look up at him for he was so much bigger then her.

"Yes?" Night inquired, his eyes wary.

"You have to promise to not mate with me until I'm at least eight moons," she mewed stubbornly. The rules were she had to be six moons, but she wanted to be eight moons at least, so that she was nearly full-grown by then.

Night hesitated, she could she he didn't want to wait, but he dipped his head, the sun sparkling in his fur. "I'll wait," he promised.

Rainstone purred and relaxed, nudging his shoulder, though she couldn't call much warmth for him. He felt like he'd be more of a friend then a mate, but he obviously felt different, his eyes sparking at her touch.

She swallowed, hoping he would never be able to know those feelings, he'd be angry and disappointed and possibly wouldn't keep the deal they'd just made.

"Lets get going," Night mewed, taking one last look at the clouds that had started to become lighter and higher as the sun had came out, so that they were once more in fog.

Rainstone nodded, wishing she could see the other side of the mountains once more, but the clouds had closed in, boxing her in there trap. But her head buzzed as she climbed carefully down the mountain, she had gotten her first taste of freedom, and she wasn't about the let it go.

Chapter 7: Back To The Start

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Rainstone scrambled back to avoid flashing claws. Her fur was bristling and her eyes were wide with fear and excitement as heat and energy pulsed through her. Her shoulder was sticky with blood from a stinging scratch, but she leaped back into the brawl, pummeling the side of a skinny brown tom with a flurry of swipes.

At the base of the third mountain she and Night been ambushed by three cats, and had quickly been pushed into an all-out fight. She jerked her head back to avoid snapping jaws from a gray and white tom.

She was glad Night was a fighter, if he wasn't able to keep most of the focus on himself, she'd have been severely injured already, she just didn't have any training, everything she was doing was based on instinct.

She had a moment to breathe as the two toms who had been snapping at her lunged for Night as he clawed the skinny brown tom away from her. Rainstone frowned, looking around for the third cat, she hadn't seen the cat well before and she couldn't see it now.

But as something leaped into her, rolling her off her paws, she knew she'd found it. *Or more it found me*, she thought as painful claws raked over her flank. She kicked out feebly, but the cat was heavier and bigger then her and she ended up pinned, her struggle all in vain as she hissed up at her attacker.

But then she froze as she looked up at the alighted green eyes of her attacker, a pretty dark brown and golden dappled she-cat. She just stared, all her wounds numb for the moment as she stared in amazement. *How does a she-cat know how to fight?* Curiosity and admiration, probably the opposite feelings of those she should have been feeling, swarmed through her and she almost purred.

Then the she-cat was pushed off of her and Night was nudging her to her paws. "We need to run, now!" he hissed as she stumbled when putting weight down on an injured paw. She looked over her shoulder and saw the three cats, each bleeding, but better off then they were, chasing after them.

Gritting her teeth, she ignored the excruciating pain as she raced after Night, not stopping until he pounding paws behind them faded to silence. Rainstone threw herself on her belly and twisted her head to look at her injured fore-paw.

She grumbled as she saw it was twisted and swollen from running on it. She glanced over her other wounds, none were too deep and they would heal with a few herbs. Then she looked at Night, he'd been lapping at the small stream they'd collapsed by, now he was soaking a bloody foreleg in it, making the water swirl crimson orange in the dusk light.

She hobbled over to him on three legs and sniffed at it as he pulled it out of the water. It wasn't deep, but still bleeding. Quickly looking him over, she saw with annoyance that he had only a bite mark on his tail that hadn't broken the skin to prove for the fight.

Grumbling, she padded over to a felled log and raked her paw through the hollow, pulling out a forepaw matted with cobwebs. Putting them on her injured paw, she tottered back to Night and laced his wound with cobwebs.

Night nodded, "Lets get going then," he mewed.

Rainstone glared at him, "I haven't healed myself yet," she snapped, pain making her irritable. She nodded to her own wounds and twisted paw. "We'll probably have to stay here for the night," she mewed discouragingly.

Night swished his tail angrily, but he didn't argue. "Fine, I'll find some prey while you heal yourself," he muttered unsympathetically. "But don't think I'm going to let you hold me back *again*," he snapped, shooting her a glare.

Rainstone fluffed up her fur and drew her lips back in a snarl,

though she knew he was just being difficult because he'd been ashamed he hadn't been able to fight he cats off and had let her be injured. That, on top of the tiring journey, was making them both short-tempered.

As Night padded off, Rainstone padded awkwardly over to some comfrey plants. Gabbing a few roots, snatching a wide oak leaf, and a long shoot of tough grass, she chewed the root into a pulp and covered her twisted paw, then wrapped it in the leaf and bound it with the grass, tying it securely.

She tested it against the ground, and relaxed as only a prickle of pain sprouted from her paw. Glaring against the setting sun that shone right in her eyes, she cleaned her wounds and then squeezed some marigold on her wounds before covering them with cobwebs.

By the time she returned to the clearing she'd left Night, the sun had faded and twilight had settled with its gray-purple light. Night looked up from where he was eating a squirrel, which was rare, and flicked his tail toward a mouse he'd left for her.

She tucked into it, happy for the food for her hungry belly. She yawned in contentment, her belly full and the air was comfortably warm, though cooling as the sky continued getting darker. "Do you want to sleep there?" she asked Night, pointing at the twisted roots under a tree that formed a natural den.

Night sighed and nodded before padding hesitantly toward the tree. Rainstone understood, there were probably all sorts of bugs under there, but it was the only place with cover for the moment. She followed him, limping and then slipping down under the roots, Night curling around her.

She had trouble going to sleep, her wounds were painful and kept her awake while every time Night bumped her injured paw she wanted to hiss. She fell asleep as the moon's white light shed silver light on her, calming her nerves and her wonder overtook her tiredness and her exhaustion eventually lulled her into a dreamless sleep.

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The next day they headed up the last mountain, walking in a tense silent, Rainstone's fur prickling every time their fur brushed. They made it to the top of the first stretch, just below the half-way mark, by sun-high.

Rainstone, who was panting from exhaustion and her legs trembled as she pulled herself onto a wide flat rock of a stream that tumbled down like a twisting waterfall. The rock was damp and she leaned down cautiously to lap at the pure water.

Night shook out his fur, a cloud of dust rising around him and he grumbled something inaudible. Rainstone's dark gray fur felt hot as the bright sun soaked into her fur like a piece of moss soaking up moss. Her paw ached and she carefully took it out of the wrap.

Outside the protection of the leaf, it felt brittle and delicate as she carefully splashed the cool water on her paw to clean off the old poultice that stuck to her fur. Then she carefully cleaned her paw with gentle licks, smoothing out the fur that had clumped in spikes in the poultice.

She carefully rolled onto her back and scratched her back and head on the warm rock while being careful not to bump her injured paw. She couldn't stop thinking about that she-cat, the she-cat who knew how to fight and could defend herself.

Rainstone's fur twitched and her paws buzzed with anticipation. If that she-cat could learn to fight, so could she! She hadn't done half bad in the battle anyways, with training, she could be very good! Even good enough to prove that she-cats could fight as well as toms!

She carefully rewrapped her paw with a fresh poultice from some roots she'd seen that grew besides the rock she laid on. Then wrapped it with a rather large dock leaf this time, and then bound it with another sprig of grass.

By then, Night has come back and Rainstone cautiously limped over to him, lifting her injured paw off the ground quickly as she had been doing all morning. "You doing okay?" the gruff mew in Night's voice almost hid his worry, but Rainstone knew him well enough to

detect it, not that she appreciated his concern.

"Fine," she answered curtly, grabbing the small bird he'd dropped at his paws. She didn't like tough bird meat, but she liked it more then shrew, which was what Night had left for himself. Rainstone flicked her tail as she once again felt the heat of the sun, there was no cover on this mountain! It was grass all the way to the top, she hoped clouds would move through, but the breeze was gentle and humming, no fresh scent to give her hope for a change in the weather.

Then again, in the mountains, that can change fast, her fur prickled at the though of a storm later that evening without any cover. She shook the thoughts away, Night was heading up the trail again and she had to follow with her limp.

Up and up they went, sometimes the trail would be almost flat, at other times, so steep she had to leap up it, which caused her to stumble on her injured paw. As they went higher, she began to get dizzy and she and Night had to stop several times between her underage and injured paw, she would have quit if she could.

She gritted her teeth though, she wouldn't give up in front of Night, wouldn't slow him down by refusing to go on that day, no matter how much her legs ached, every sharp bolt of pain every time she put her injured paw down, or however much her paws bled from being dragged over the stony ground in her exhaustion, leaving smudges of blood as a trail.

She was never so relieved when Night halted early, though they were so close to the top that she could clearly see the top, only a hill stood in their way. There was still no cover and the grass was sparse, the ground mostly gray stone, making it look like a faint green mist over the slope.

There was no stream, but there was a small pool of collected rain water. She bent her head down to lap a bit, it was a little stale and warmer then she liked, but she'd live. Night crouched beside her to drink some water as well, his amber eyes watching her as he lapped at the pool and she sat up.

"Well, we'll be back in the cave in about three days," Night mewed, looking happy at the prospect of finally finishing the assessment. But Rainstone, even though she didn't want to keep walking all day with her injured paw, didn't want to go back to the cave where it was stuffy and she was confined to the dark cave and stuck sorting through dusty herbs and pretending to be a helpless and naïve she-cat.

Although, she was looking forward to seeing Pepper again, she couldn't wait to tell her brother about all that she'd seen! Though she'd keep her dreams a secret, they were for her alone, at least until she worked out what they meant.

Thinking of her dreams, she remembered the one word that puzzled her more then anything, 'ancestors.' She shivered just thinking of the word, it meant something important, she was sure, something that she needed to know.

She looked at Night, he'd never mention the word, she wondered if he knew and decided it wouldn't hurt to try. "Night?" she mewed cautiously, trying to pick the right words.

Night glanced over his shoulder from where he was pulling grass into a large nest. "What?" he asked, his voice was guarded but not unfriendly like earlier.

"What's an 'ancestor?" Rainstone mewed, looking at him with her head tilted to one side and her ears flopping slightly to the side.

Night frowned, his amber eyes showed nothing but confusion. "I don't know, where did you even hear that word? Or did you make it up?" Night mewed, his voice growling the last part.

Rainstone fluffed up her fur in annoyance, "I'm not making it up! And where I heard it... its hard to explain, I don't think I ever heard it, I just heard it in my head..." Rainstone trailed off in confusion, forgetting what she was trying to do.

"So you did make it up? You can't lie to a tom! You'll be in a lot of trouble if you do that back at the cave! Remember our deal?" Night growled, his fur prickling.

Rainstone jumped to her paws, her attempt of being cautious gone in her surge of angry resentment. "I'm not lying!" she hissed, "I heard it in a dream! And its important! I know it is!" she hissed so viciously that Night's eyes widened and he took a step back.

His eyes were calm though as she stood, trembling, in front of him. He waved his tail soothingly, "If you heard it in your dream, then it was probably just something your mind made up and you thought it was important, its no big deal, besides such a thing as an *ancestor*, doesn't exist," Night mewed gently.

"Yes it does!" Rainstone insisted stubbornly, refusing to believe her dreams meant nothing.

Night laid his tail over her shoulders and she wanted nothing to do but bite it off, but she just shrugged it off and padded away a few steps to the edge of the cliff side of the mountain overlooking the other side of the valley.

But she was too distressed to marvel in her wonderings of who lived out there and what it would be like to travel over them. *I know my dreams are important! I just wish I could figure them out...* Miserable at her own ignorance, her helplessness tightened itself around her like a snake constricting her, making it impossible to breathe and she blinked back tears as her eyes watered.

"Are you okay?" the warm and strained voice of Night echoed in her ears but she just shrugged and hung her head, she didn't want to talk to him. "Do you want to come to the nest?" he asked, his voice pleading, but Rainstone shook her head, ignoring his sigh of sadness.

Night's paw steps retreated and she heard him curling down into the makeshift nest as the sun disappeared and the moon came out. Even after seeing it so often, it could make her forget her worries and fears.

She felt herself melting away into its silver light and her exhaustion pulled at her. She laid down on her back so she could watch the sky as she slid into sleep, she felt like she was drifting on clouds and her misery fell away, dropping down to the valley below, waiting to

snap her back in its jaws, but she was safe from it for now, and she relished in it, having the best sleep for nights.

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Yawning, Rainstone rolled to her paws the next morning, feeling refreshed from her good night's sleep. Night was padding toward her, two mice hanging from their tails were in his jaw. She grabbed one and ate with him in silence, not wanting to talk about last night.

Night didn't seem to either and they soon began climbing up the last bit to the rounded top of the mountain. The gray light of dawn and the cool breath of wind wreathed around her, like the sweet perfume of lavender in her herb store.

Her paw was stronger then yesterday, and she was hardly limping as they started off, her pace slowing only slightly when they had gotten to the top. Rainstone, although shouldn't have been start-struck after seeing the view two times recently, purred as she spun around, seeing the valley and unfamiliar and desolate peaks in a single heartbeat.

She purred like an idiot as she trotted lightly around the rim of the jagged edged peak. She turned to Night who was watching her with amusement. "You love the view that much?" he laughed lightly, padding over to her and brushing a piece of grass off her shoulder with his tail.

Rainstone just nodded, breathing in a deep breath of contentment. "It looks amazing," she mewed, looking around with wide eyes once more. Night touched her nose, his eyes stared down at her, his amber eyes warm and he pressed against her.

Rainstone forced herself to relax against him, though she just wanted to step away. *What? Am I worrying about his feelings now?* She did think that it was mean of her to not try to love him, but she really didn't love him, no matter how hard she tried, she knew she would never feel close to him.

"We better get moving though," Night mewed as the sun rose over

the knoll where the cave was.

Rainstone sighed, though she knew he was right, they wanted to get to the bottom of the mountain before tonight, she took one last look of the surrounding territories before following Night down the mountain. But the heartbeat she left the peak, she felt as if the journey had ended and as dark fog clouded her mind, she knew was back where she had started.

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Two days later, as dusk came on, they were climbing the last slope to the cave. Rainstone wondered how that slope had ever been difficult for her, it felt so easy after climbing the other three mountain peaks.

The loose dirt cushioned her twisted paw and she hardly limped as she followed Night sedately, too tired and worn out to do anything but follow him up the slope. She pricked her ears and peered around Night as a call sounded from above her head.

She blinked as a lanky black and white shape leapt out from behind the ivy curtain and raced toward them, skidding to a halt in front of her and blinking his blue eyes with relief. For a moment, Rainstone didn't recognize the muscular tom in front of her who stood three mouse lengths taller then her, then she gasped as his scent hit her.

"Pepper!" she exclaimed, nuzzling him as he licked her ear. Pepper purred, it sounded deeper then before. *We were only gone for half a moon for goodness sakes!* Pepper turned and greeted Night with a polite nod, though his eyes had wandered to her paw wrapped in a dock leaf.

"What happened?" Pepper asked, his eyes darkening with concern as he sniffed at her paw.

Rainstone's fur prickled a little from annoyance and embarrassment as Pepper pounded her with questions that were too loud and numerous for her sleeping ears. "Lets get into the cave first," Night's mew echoed her annoyed feelings.

Pepper nodded, falling silent as they finished the trek up the slope, though his eyes watched her every move, as if waiting to help if she fell. *I'm not a kit anymore!* She thought with annoyance and moved closer to Night to be away from Pepper.

Pepper didn't seem to mind she'd left his side and he even purred with a bit of amusement before bounding ahead of them, evidently to announce their return. Rainstone shared a glance with Night before they entered the cave.

"Remember our promise? Just follow the rules for now," Night mewed, seeing the apprehension in her eyes. He stroked his tail down her spine and she allowed herself to be soothed and followed him in confidently.

The heartbeat she breathed in the scent of all the cats who dwelled in the cave and the slummy tone and words of the other toms, she was already missing the glimpses of the outside world and cold wind of freedom.

As she was pushed around and flirted with by all the other toms in a jumble of celebration, she felt as if she was right back where she had started when she'd first left the kit-den, not knowing how to react or what she was supposed to do.

Chapter 8: Breaking Rules And Promises

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Rainstone sneezed as dust rose as she took out her herbs. A moon of being back in the cave, and she was ready to scream. All she did was check her herbs and play along with the toms games. She didn't even have much time with Pepper, he was gone so much. And she hadn't had one more dream since she'd returned! She was beginning to think it had all been in her head...

Although, Whisper had become an even closer friend and they'd often go out to collect herbs together with heir mates. "Do you have any extra Tormentil?" Whisper asked from where she was checking her herbs on the other side of the den, snapping her out of her irritated thoughts.

Rainstone sniffed, "A little," she muttered, grabbing the root and padding over to Whisper, handing her the root.

Whisper nodded, "I'll get some more in the next few days," she mewed, her voice, which never shook from patience, was as calm and friendly as always. *Figures, if I loved Night like she loves Pepper, then it might be easier.*

Annoyance flashed through her, how could Whisper stand it? "What's the point of all this?!" she hissed, her fur fluffing up and her tail lashing behind her.

Whisper didn't look surprised by her sudden anger. "The point of what?" she asked calmly, her green eyes gazing into hers like green pools of water.

"The point of gatherings herbs! We hardly ever use them, but all we ever do is mess around with herbs! I hate it!" she spat, her tail lashing behind her as she paced impatiently, her paws prickling

against the cool stone.

Whisper moved in front of her, the taller she-cat blocking her way, she glared up at the silver she-cat. "Rainstone, you need to calm down, its dangerous to question your duty, you should be honored to be able to help your mate," Whisper mewed in a low and serious tone, her green eyes piercing her so sharply that she had to look away in embarrassment.

She sighed, though she still found it hard to breathe in the dusty den, "Fine, but I don't feel honored, I feel *used*." Whisper blinked sympathetically.

"I know, but you have to live with it, you might try looking at the positive things rather then the negative things," Whisper mewed, her dark flecked fur shimmering in the strong sunlight of the afternoon.

Rainstone's nose twitched, it was too warm in the cave, she missed the cold taste of the wind. "What kind of positive things? We don't get to do anything important!" she snapped.

"We don't get to do anything dangerous," Whisper countered, her voice still patient.

Rainstone flicked her tail, "I'd rather be doing dangerous things," she grumbled, shoving her herbs back in place.

"You will be," Whisper mewed.

Rainstone flicked her ears, "What does that mean?" she growled.

"It can't be long before you get a Trainee to instruct, and if she's anything like you, it'll be dangerous," Whisper purred, but Rainstone was hardly amused.

"Except there are no fighter kits at the moment," she snapped discouragingly.

Whisper nodded, "True, but there should be before long anyways," she mewed.

Rainstone growled, her tail whisking behind her as she stalked out of the den, leaving Whisper behind.

"Hey little kitty," she flattened her ears at Sleet's annoying mew.

"You're lucky Night's not here right now," she muttered, too low for him to hear.

"Do you want to go get some fresh-kill?" Sleet asked, sidling up to her.

"Go ask your own mate," she snapped, stalking away before he could clip her ears, "Its against the rules for me to go," she growled over her shoulder.

"I love she-cats with an attitude," Sleet purred, sitting down and wrapping his white tail around his paws.

Rainstone rolled her eyes, "Ugh!" she muttered, padding over to where Pepper sat by the entrance. "Can you take me outside? I need some fresh air," she mewed.

Pepper nodded, his blue eyes gentle as he nuzzled her, "Of course, but I've got to be back here by dusk," he mewed, leading her out, as her brother, he could take her out.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked as she closed her eyes and just breathed in the clear air.

"Someplace where we can be alone," she muttered, her eyes tracking three small dots trekking across the browning valley. She knew one was Night, even though she couldn't really see.

"Okay," Pepper mewed, leading her at a run across the valley. Rainstone pushed herself to keep up, her legs, though shorter then Pepper's, where stronger and she pushed past him, though not too far, she didn't know where she was heading.

Pepper swerved behind her over a sharp ridge that dropped suddenly down a few steps to a wide dirt clearing. There wasn't a speck of green and the other side of the clearing fell into a steep chasm that rose up again a few tail-lengths away to the mountain

ridge.

"No cat comes here often, there's no prey and its too dangerous to train," Pepper mewed, flicking his ear at the chasm.

Excitement churned through Rainstone's belly, this was perfect! She could finally do what she'd wanted ever since she'd seen that fighting she-cat! "Pepper! Do you know what we could do here?!" she mewed, her voice squeaking like a kit as she bounded over to him, her tail straight in the air.

"No, what is it?" Pepper mewed, his eyes wary.

"You can train me here! You can train me how to hunt and then all you know about fighting!" she purred.

Pepper's eyes grew blank with horror, "What?! Rainstone! That's a terrible idea! If any cat were to find out you would be *killed*!" he hissed, his eyes worried and fearful.

Rainstone felt a surge of indignation, "No cat would find out! You just told me no cat comes here, and its sheltered from view until you are standing on the edge of the drop!" she protested, angling her ears to where they'd leapt down.

"What if some cat follows us?" Pepper mewed, his initial fear gone, but he still looked far from agreeing.

"Why would they do that? You're future leader, and I'm the mate of the other future leader!" she mewed, her tail flicking impatiently, why couldn't Pepper just agree?

"No, its too much a risk," Pepper mewed stubbornly.

Rainstone growled, "Then I'm just going to keep getting angrier and angrier until I do something that will definitely get me killed!" she hissed.

Pepper's eyes darkened, "You wouldn't," he growled.

"Its not really a matter of choice! One moon back in the cave and I'm ready to screech at every cat who comes near me! I won't last

until you're leader, Pepper," her tone became a gasping beg.

Pepper still looked worried, but something in her eyes, some desperate plea won him over. "Okay," he sighed, hanging his head, "I'll teach you."

...

That was how it started, every day, between training, Pepper would take Rainstone out and they'd train. Pepper wouldn't admit it, but Rainstone had a talent for it, she mastered everything faster then he had and soon he was just training her all the new things he learned.

The fighting part was the hardest, Pepper wasn't good at ducking and twisting and timing his claws. But Rainstone picked up everything he showed her and always easily beat him when they sparred. He knew she wanted to learn more, but he insisted it was too dangerous for him to ask for advanced battle training, it'd look suspicious, especially since he could hardly do the basics.

As they padded into the cave, dusk light streaming behind them and a bunch of daisy leaves in Rainstone's jaws. She waved her tail at Pepper in farewell, her paws buzzing with what she'd learned.

She'd converted one of Pepper's new hunting moves, in which he hid and then lunged out to hook his prey in his claws by sliding along the grass. She'd changed it to hooking out his legs and then rolling him on his back, he'd been so impressed he'd asked her to teach it to him, though he'd had trouble aiming for the soft spot in her legs.

She quickly put her herbs away, ignoring Droplet who had been going through her own herbs, pulling out a few shriveled berries. As she exited the den, she blinked in surprise as she was met by Scamp. His fur unruly as ever and his bright amber eyes warm with friendliness.

"Night asked me to escort you over to him, we'll having dinner with Squirrel, my mate," Scamp mewed calmly, his voice wasn't judging or suggestive, it made her relax.

"Yes, I know who Squirrel is," she mewed slowly, padding by his side as he led her through a throng of cats, shooing toms away with sharp glares. Some higher toms would ask their friends to escort their she-cat's to them, to keep flirty toms from intervening with their journey. And with Night being the future leader...

They made their way to the back of the cave, Night sat with a large rabbit at his paws and talked quietly with Squirrel, the red she-cat answered politely and Night was somber in his questions, though his eyes were focused on her as she padded up to him and sat by his side, her fur prickling as she brushed by Scamp, his curious bright gaze warming her more then Night's loving one.

All through the meal, as they all ate and Scamp and Night discussed things such as the weather, the lineage of the cats, and the possibility of new trainees. "Sandy and Frost are almost three moons, they'll be made Trainees soon," Scamp was mewing.

Night nodded, there were no fighter kits so he had nothing to report. "Eh, maybe you should start thinking of kits?" Scamp suggested, his eyes were warm, but not pushy.

Night's fur fluffed up, "We're good, thanks," he mewed curtly. Rainstone sighed in relief, she was only seven moons old, so she still had a moon of clean youth left. Though she stiffened as she saw the considering gleam in Night's amber eyes.

He better not be thinking of breaking our promise! She thought with a surge of anger. Then a voice piped in her mind, why not? *you broke your promise... Shut up! That's different!* She told the voice, though she shifted her paws uneasily.

"So, what about you and Squirrel?" Night mewed gruffly, obviously trying to shift the focus.

Scamp eyes darkened slightly and he frowned as Squirrel gave him an uneasy glance. "We tried it once, but we didn't like it," he mewed awkwardly.

Night just shrugged and Scamp relaxed. "Anyways, its getting late, we're going to go to our nest," Scamp mewed, standing up and

Squirrel standing up as well.

Night nodded, "Rainstone, just wait here, I have to have a quick word with my father," he mewed, angling his ears toward Crag who was with Leaf outside his den.

Rainstone nodded as he padded away and Squirrel headed toward the Hunters side of the sleeping den. But Scamp hesitated by her, shifting awkwardly and his eyes darting around. "Yes?" she asked politely, glancing up at him, enjoying the warm feeling in her belly that was new to her.

"Oh, uh, um, I just wanted to say it was nice talking to you, we should do it more often," he mewed politely, flicking her shoulder with his tail, but for once, she didn't mind it and just nodded.

"I enjoyed it too," she mewed, with a hint of a purr. Scamp held her gaze for a moment longer, then followed Squirrel into the den. She sat thoughtfully, watching where Scamp had disappeared, she'd always liked the rambunctious tom, but she'd never seen him in that way, *maybe its not so bad after all*. She thought, following Night to their nest. *Maybe its nice to find a friend, or maybe something more.*

...

She was still thinking about Scamp the next day, hardly able to concentrate on her jobs. She kept telling herself that loving one of those toms was wrong, especially when she had Night. But as she watched him, throwing his head back and laughing with his friends, filling her ears with the loud ring, she couldn't help the warm feeling from tickling her.

She skipped training with Pepper that day, too distracted to even try. And she wandered around, trying to think clearly about her feelings that seemed to effect her so much. *Is this how Whisper feels? Is that how she stands it?*

At dusk she was sitting outside the herb den, just thinking about how wrong and right everything had turned, she found it almost stupid how easily she'd been swayed, not that there was much else to occupy her thoughts, being stuck in the cave.

She looked up as a shadow fell over her, Scamp stood by her, his amber eyes warm. "Hey, Rainstone," he mewed shyly, his eyes glancing around, to make sure no cat was watching. "Look, I want to talk to you alone, could you meet me outside the cave tonight? Just tell Night you're going to make your dirt," he whispered.

Rainstone's heart sped up at the thought of breaking the rules and she gave a small nod, a purr rising in her throat as she stared after him, wide-eyed like a silly fawn.

"Rainstone?" she jumped, her fur fluffed out as she spun around to stare at Night. "Are you okay?" he asked, looking at her curiously, though there was sheen over his eyes that made her fur tingle in apprehension.

"Uh, yes," she mewed awkwardly, feeling a wave of guilt for her feelings and agreements, but she felt no regret.

"Good, cause we're going out for awhile," Night mewed, his voice low and tinged with meaning. It sent ice down her spine.

She followed him out behind the ivy curtain, pausing at his shoulder, she had almost caught up to him, her eye level at his shoulder so she could look over him. The sun was just waving goodnight, its last tip disappearing behind the mountain.

Her fur prickled, most cats didn't go out so late, what did he want to do? She was even more perturbed when he led her *up* the slope heading for the top of the mountain ridge that the cave was built into, not leading her down to the valley like usual.

The slope was stepper above the cave then below and she had to strain all her muscles to get to the top. She rolled on her back, panting, as the ground flattened out, a narrow ridge of brown grass like the spine of a giant cat.

She stood up, the ridge was about three tail-lengths wide and there was nothing up here. "So, what now?" she asked. *I hope he didn't drag me up here just to show me the view!* Though she had to admit, the view of the valley wasn't half bad, though it couldn't compare with the top of the mountains.

"Over here," Night mewed, flicking his tail and looking down at something. Rainstone bounded over to him, skidding to a halt as she saw that the ground fell down suddenly to a steep sided grassy hollow that was full of wildflowers.

"What is this place?" she asked, sniffing the air, there was cat scent, but it was a little stale.

"Its one of the places some cat come to mate," Night mewed, his muscles tensing.

"What?" Rainstone could hardly believe her ears. "You promised!" she gasped, as he pushed her into the hollow, she looked up at him as she landed gracefully on her paws, crushing flowers and the aroma became stronger, thought she could hardly register the heavy scent. "You can't do this!" she hissed.

"Yes I can, I'm sorry Rainstone, but the promise is close enough to complete, and Scamp is right, the Fighters need new kits, its our duty," Night mewed, leaping down beside her, she pressed her back against the other side of the hollow.

"I won't let you! I'm too young to mate!" she hissed.

"Give it up! You're a she-cat! This is one of the few jobs she-cat's exist for!" Night hissed, his eyes angry. "Now shut up and let me do it!" Night hissed. He swatted her with his massive paw, Rainstone, unable to dodge, fell to the ground on her belly and Night leapt on her, she didn't care to remember anything else.

...

Rainstone stumbled down the slope, she felt dazed and weak and confused. The dull anger that throbbed through her had no place to go, since she was too shocked to yowl hatred at Night as he led her down. All the friendly feelings she'd grown for him, had disappeared, replaced by cold disappointment and hot resentment.

I thought he was good enough to keep his promise. Well if he is going to break his promise, then I'm going to continue breaking mine! That was the one clear thought she got as she stumbled down the steep slope.

Whatever the physical pleasure she'd felt, emotionally, it had been murder. Her sanity had practically been executed by that, and now she felt as if she could never trust Night on anything ever again.

She didn't speak a word though as they padded to their nest, though she stretched herself out uncomfortably, keeping herself from being touched by Night. She wasn't going to complain, she wasn't going to yowl or hiss, she'd just let him know very clearly that she no longer cared for him at all.

She could almost feel his regret and sadness as he sighed and stared at her back, letting her silently fume by herself. She closed her eyes as the night wore out, listening for paw-steps to signal that it was time to meet Scamp. She wanted to meet him even more now, and a part of her wanted Night to know, so that he would be hurt more then just by her silence.

Eventually, near moon-high, she heard the small scuffle of paws above the rough snoring of the Fighters and their mates. Carefully, without a glance at Night, she got to her paws and padded silently to the entrance, as if she was stalking prey, she didn't see the amber eyes watching her leave with longing.

She glanced around at the entrance, her ears pricked as she saw Scamp's tail disappear behind the ivy curtain. Excitement momentarily washing away her tight misery, she stalked after him quietly, tiptoeing through the cave until she made it out.

She saw the silver world, the stars, the lights, the majesty, and Scamp in a single glance. While marveling at the silver light, she followed Scamp to the side, so that they were out of view of the cave. She blinked as he pushed through a thick wall or prickly sagebrush, did he want her to get her pelt fur of prickles?

But she followed him, and stared as she saw that it opened to a sloped grassy clearing surrounded by steep rocks on one side and tall sagebrush on the other. "Wow! Its like a little private clearing!" she mewed softly, looking at how to moonlight touched the sagebrush, illuminating the ghostly white stems.

She turned back to Scamp, her eyes wide in amazement. "Its so beautiful," she whispered.

Scamp purred and nodded, "Rainstone, I know that you must be wondering why I asked you here..." he trailed off and Rainstone nodded, encouraging him to continue. "Well, its because I like you, your attitude, your defiance, your impatience, your voice, your everything!" Scamp burst out, avoiding her eyes and clawing the grass with his claws. "I just wanted to know!" he sighed.

"Know what?" Rainstone whispered, sidling up to him and staring at him closely.

"I want to know *you*, the real you, not the act you put on," he hesitated, "Do you want to know me too?" Scamp asked, holding her gaze steadily, though his eyes were begging. "I know there are problems, but we could make it work," he insisted as she hesitated.

Rainstone thought for a moment, did she want to know Scamp? Did she want to know his desires? His dreams? Share his emotions? Care for him more then any other cat, even Night? She knew the answer, her wondering all day and then Night's broken promise at the end of the day had confirmed it.

Looking at him in the eyes she moved so closely that his breath ruffled her whiskers. "Yes, I do."

Chapter 9: Leaning Over The Edge

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"What? No way! I don't believe you! There is no way you took an eagle down all by yourself!" Rainstone exclaimed disbelievingly, shoving Scamp with a paw. She was laying on her back, the frosty night air burned her lungs, but the silver air and the warmth of Scamp kept her from feeling its chill.

"Its true!" Scamp defended himself, his amber eyes laughing, turning his head toward her, he was on his back as well.

"Then why did I never see this eagle?" Rainstone asked, narrowing her eyes, feeling as if she'd trapped him.

"You were still in the kit-den at the time! How you didn't hear about it is beyond me!" Scamp laughed.

Rainstone puffed out a breath, making her whiskers tremble, there was no proof she had against that claim. "If only I could ask Night, then I could prove you wrong," she muttered, swiping a paw at his ear playfully.

Scamp laughed, rolling on top of her, pushing the breath out of her. "Get off of me you lump!" Rainstone protested, laughing, the sound ringing through the clear night air.

Scamp moved around so that his eyes stared into hers, the happiness she felt was reflected in his eyes and she could never remember feeling so at ease. She'd been meeting him for nearly a moon in the private clearing and they met as long as the sky was clear.

She shivered as a cold breeze rushed around her, rattling the sagebrush. The only thing she wished was different was that Scamp

was a Fighter, then he could teach her more. Pepper had left with Whisper on his final assessment a quarter moon prior, so she was always bored during the day.

Scamp was her one life saver, somehow always making her forget her worries at night, all her problems floated away on his laugh and rather exaggerated stories.

"So, did you have any adventures on your assessment?" Scamp asked, laying on his belly with his forepaws folded in front of him and his head propped on them, his amber eyes watching her.

Rainstone twitched her ear, "No... not really," she mewed, none of her experiences seemed to compare to his 'adventures.'

"What about when you came back when your paw wrapped in comfrey? What was that about?" Scamp pushed.

"Well, there was a little fight with a few rouges, but we are alive so its all good," Rainstone mewed, not remembering the fight as anything but an embarrassment.

Scamp sighed, "You have a very dull prospective," he complained.

Rainstone swatted at his ears, cuffing them and he laughed. "Though your temper is hotter then fire!" Scamp laughed, it rang louder then the cry of an eagle and echoed in her ears louder then the rumble of thunder.

They continued talking, but Rainstone must have eventually fallen asleep, for Scamp was shaking her awake as the silver light faded to be replaced by the dull gray light before dawn. "Time to go back to the cave," Scamp whispered.

Rainstone nodded, feeling clean and refreshed after the rest. She stood up and quickly groomed her fur, washing out Scamp's strong scent and smoothing the sleep ruffled fur. Then she sighed and gently touched Scamp's nose, it was silky and cold while sparking her heart, it was exactly like how she thought the stars would feel like.

She heaved a huge sigh, pushing out of the sage brush and carefully

climbing into the cave, slinking silently back to the Fighter's den and curling into her nest with Night, just barely letting his fur brush hers.

After he'd mated with her, she'd hardly spoken to him, never purred to him, except when he greeted her and other toms were in ear-shot. He'd mated her several times since she turned eight moons, about a quarter moon ago, almost every other day at least, but still she wasn't expecting kits.

Some cats whispered that she was unable to have kits, she hoped that was the case. To her, mating had turned into something she did to get over with it, she didn't dwell on it, she didn't think about it, and she didn't respond to it.

She could hear the other cats getting up around her, their she-cats' grooming them and purring softly, the hum that was soaked with forcedness made her sick and when Night lifted his head, she brushed his fur down with her tail, refusing to groom him.

He nodded at her, his eyes were sad and weary. She watched him leave and padded after him, waiting for him to grab her breakfast. He got her a mouse, which she ate as he left to ensure the borders of the valley.

After that, she groomed her fur, ignoring the cat-calls from practically every tom who walked by. She glanced up as a shadow stayed in front of her. It was Hawk.

"Father," she mewed curtly.

"Rainstone, why don't we go on a walk," Hawk mewed politely, his blue eyes unreadable.

Rainstone shrugged, "Sure, I need some more marigold," she muttered. Hawk's claws grazed her ears, but she was so used to it that she hardly felt it.

"A simple 'yes,' is all that is needed," Hawk mewed shortly, his calm mew sounded forced.

Rainstone shrugged and stood up, now that she was almost full

grown, her chin was at his shoulder and he led her out of the cave. The air was colder then usual, and the sun was hidden behind thick clouds that must have appeared with dawn.

"There will be snow before long," Hawk mewed, his eyes narrowing in worry.

Rainstone wanted to ask what snow was, but she'd probably just get claws as an answer. She broke off from the trail to grab several stalks of marigold. "What did you want to talk to me about?" she mumbled around the plants.

"I wanted to ask you, on behalf of Night, why you feel so against him," Hawk mewed.

Rainstone's fur bristled, "Tell him to ask me himself," she snapped back, dropping her herbs.

Hawk glared at her, "You will not answer a tom like that," he growled.

Rainstone lashed her tail, "I'll answer you however I want to!" she spat, glaring at him, feeling all her worry and anger churn in her belly, just waiting to finally explode as she fumed it out.

"Answer my question!" Hawk hissed, crouching down in the hunting crouch Pepper had shown her.

"If you must know, its because he broke a promise to me!" She spat, the sense of betrayal and resentment pricked at her claws.

"Night does not have to keep his promises to you," Hawk pointed out, straightening up, obviously making an effort to calm down.

"Why not!" Rainstone burst out, anger bubbled at her lips. "Because I'm a she-cat?" she scoffed.

"Yes!" Hawk spat, "Night knows his place, and you should know yours by now! But instead, you keep leaning over the edge, and you need to stop or else you will end up falling and never recovering!" Hawk spat.

Rainstone felt coldness replace her anger and she glared at him, an ice-eyed look that made Hawk realize he'd done nothing but push his daughter further away. She picked up her marigold and angled her ears toward the cave, Hawk had nothing to do but lead her back, and she turned to the herb den without even another glance back at him.

She blinked back crystal tears as she turned her face away from her father, a hole appearing where her family should have been in her mind. She'd never felt so alone, with Pepper gone, her anger toward Night, her resentment toward Droplet, and her coldness toward Hawk, she felt completely alone.

She put her herbs away, sniffling quietly and listening to Grass and Red gossip over Storm's kits. "They'll be Trainees soon, I wonder if I'll train one of them," Grass was mewing, the pale gray she-cat's fur twitched and her bright green eyes shone.

"Maybe, you haven't trained a cat yet, hey Rainstone, maybe you'll get the other!" Red called, the mottled red she-cat's white paws were carefully separating herbs, her blue eyes never leaving her work.

Rainstone gave a noncommittal grunt, not wanting to get drawn into the conversation. "Rainstone, do you know if Boulder is back yet?" Red asked.

"Why would I know where your mate is?" Rainstone grumbled, but she padded to the entrance anyways and looked out the entrance, seeing Boulder and Fox talking near the ivy curtain. "He's back," she reported, Red coming to her shoulder and nodding in thanks as she trotted over to Boulder.

Rainstone turned back to her marigold stalks, stripping the leaves carefully off the stems. "Rainstone, the other day I was talking to Droplet, and she said you haven't talked to her since you left the kit-den, is that true? That was almost six moons ago," Grass mewed.

Why are you still here? Rainstone wondered, the gray she-cat was just messing around with some soiled herbs. "Isn't Tuft looking for you?" Rainstone asked, distracting the she-cat for a moment by

asking her about her mate.

Grass shook her head, "He's out hunting, he won't be back until just after sun-high," Grass answered, turning to look at her with her head tilted to the side. "Can't you answer my question?"

"Nope," Rainstone mewed, putting her herbs away and trotting out of the den, sending an annoyed Grass a smirk as she trotted by.

She headed for the ivy curtain and stretched out on the smooth stone. She had nothing to do, so she might as well take a quick nap and catch up on some of the sleep she lost during the night, and she quickly fell asleep in the slanted sunlight.

Rainstone dreamt. She stood in murky gray light, mist rolling around her paws, though there was no breeze. She pricked her ears to try to hear the only sound in the gloominess, *du thump, du thump, du thump.*

It sounded like a heartbeat, it grew louder, and louder, until she could hardly stand it. Then it faded into silence and she stared around, wondering what had just happened, she hadn't had these kind of dreams since she'd returned from the assessment, and this one was more confusing then the others.

Then there was a flicker of white light that drew her attention toward her left side. A cat, the black cat with amber eyes, padded toward her, illuminated by the white light. Although, however much the she-cat padded forward, she seemed to get no closer.

"What! What do you want?!" Rainstone called desperately, but the moment she took a step forward, the light began fading back into the gray light. She shivered as a breeze of ice blew into her fur, slicing her fur apart.

She wailed, feeling miserable and confused. "*Do not fear*," a voice murmured softly in her ear. "*The cold will help you, you must watch and wait before leaning over the edge*," the voice continued, the same ancient murmur.

"Where are you? Can't you tell me who you are?" Rainstone asked,

staring around the dull light, her eyes narrowed against the breeze.

"*You will find me in your ancestors*," the voice murmured, fading to a breath.

"But I don't know what ancestors are!" Rainstone protested, taking a step forward, though she couldn't see anything.

"*Then I will show you*." Then, in a flash of blinding light, the gray misty world was swept away and she was standing, or more levitating, in a black sky, stars appearing one after another, her eyes focusing on each star as it appeared, wonder filling her, her mind reaching to grasp what she was being shown.

Ancestors and stars, they are connected. She blinked, her mind aching as she struggled to grasp what seemed so evident, yet so out of reach. Like a bird that flutters just out of reach at the last moment, the hunter falling back with only feathers to remind them of the bird.

Then she felt something grab her shoulder and she whirled around, her eyes wide with shock as she stared into Scamp's bright amber eyes, his purr vibrating through her mind. The sound filled her and vibrated in her bones and she felt herself melting into his warmth and protective watch.

Then she blinked open her eyes, and instead of Scamp's bright amber eyes, she was looking into Night's orange-amber ones. She sat up, after being so cold in her dream, heat rushed through her and she felt groggy and the chilly breeze that ruffled her fur from under the ivy curtain made her shiver.

"What?" She muttered quietly, touching his nose quickly as she saw Ice watching her with Stick by his paws.

"There's about to be a ceremony, Frost and Sandy are becoming Trainees," Night mewed gruffly, avoiding her eyes. Rainstone shrugged and shook out her fur, following him over to the side of the cave, Night on one side, and Scamp somehow ending up on her other, Squirrel on the side opposite of her.

Scamp, while settling down, 'accidentally' brushed against her fur and sat close enough for his tail to entwine with hers, the darkness hiding the gesture. *Watch and wait before leaning over the edge*, that's what she'd heard in her dream, Hawk had said almost the same thing to her earlier as well, was she being warned about Scamp? Or her learning how to hunt and fight? Or her resentment toward Night?

She sighed, when had she broken so many rules? *When Night broke his promise*, her mind said stubbornly, though her memory wasn't so bad that she'd forgotten that she had first broken the promise, then Night.

But now she was watching Frost, the small silver she-kit with white tabby stripes and glowing blue eyes. Tangle padded forward, sweeping his tail over the kit's shoulder's possessively. To Rainstone, she thought the kit looked frightened, and took comfort from Tangle's comforting tail.

Then Sandy padded forward, looking more confident then her sister, the pale ginger she-cat had faint stripes that gleamed in the dusk light that peeped in from under the ivy curtain and the small hole that served as the cave's entrance.

Though, Rainstone saw irritableness in her orange eyes, already the defeated look, that so many she-cats hid, had appeared in the four moon old kit's eyes. *Why did they get to wait till four moon when I was two moons?* She twitched her ears in annoyance.

She listened to see if she was given one of them as a Trainee, but she knew it was unlikely, even though she was a Hunter from birth, she'd been given a Fighter mate, so she'd probably only be given Fighter she-cat Trainees. And as expected, they were given Hunter she-cats. Frost had Twist, and Sandy had Squirrel.

After that, Rainstone pressed against Night, allowing him to guide her through the boisterous toms who, as always, took this as a chance to josh, flirt, and mess around in 'celebration.' Night, unfortunately, wanted to mess around, and she had to fake a silly little kitty act as she was surrounded by Pebble, Trip, and Sleet. Each trying to brush against her fur, lick her ears, and entwine his

tail with hers.

Night was flirting with Tinge, the small she-cat was cornered by him and Snake. Rainstone felt a surge of anger as Night curled his body around Tinge. *How dare he act like that?! Can't he see he's sickening her?*

Ignoring the toms, she pushed her way through them commandingly, and they watched her, mouths agape at her attitude. She stamped her paw and Night turned to face her as she stood with her tail lashing. "Leave Tinge alone, Night," she growled.

Night pressed against Tinge harder, making the she-cat whimper. "No," he answered shortly. His eyes half glazed.

Rainstone lashed her tail, Night was in a mood, letting himself get caught up in the immorality of the celebration. *I know I said I wouldn't do it again, but I need to do it now*, waggling her shoulders and waving her curled tail, she sidled up to Night and wrapped her tail around his neck.

"But then how will we mate tonight, if you're with another she-cat," Rainstone murmured, it was a question, but she said it more like a statement.

Night's eyes sparked, the amber eyes were unfocused and Rainstone knew he wasn't thinking straight. She moved forward, letting her tail unwrap itself and flick his muzzle as she looked over her shoulder with an innocently suggestive look, if such a thing was possible.

Night jumped after her, leading her through the cats and out of the cave. With the first blast of cold air, Rainstone fluffed up her fur and Night blinked, looking a little more normal, but he still started padding up the slope to their spot.

No! I'm not mating tonight! She leaped forward and cuffed Night's ears, he jumped and looked back at her, his fur fluffed up. "Get a grip!" she hissed, glaring at him.

Night blinked, his eyes surprised and confused. "What?" he

mumbled.

"Stop acting like every other tom! You're better then them!" Rainstone hissed, suddenly realizing how, even though she hated him, she trusted him to act better then every tom else, except maybe Scamp.

Night's eyes looked ashamed for a moment, then they flared with anger. "Why do I always have to be better then every other cat, but you can go around breaking the rules like nothing?!" Night hissed.

Rainstone fluffed up her fur, ready to shoot back a retort, but he swept on. "Don't lie, I know you go out at night to watch the moon, you're not supposed to leave the cave without a tom!" Night hissed.

Rainstone's first reaction was relief, he didn't know she was meeting Scamp, but then she was angry again. "There's nothing wrong with what I'm doing!" she hissed, her dark eyes snapping with frustration. "It's not fair!"

Night, although usually sympathetic about that, just looked annoyed. "That's your problem! You think everything is unfair for *you*, you never stopped to think about *my* problems, did you? As the next leader, there's so much more I have to learn, I have to deal with rebellious cats who might try to kill me or my father, and then after a long day, I want to have a little fun and then you just get in the way! Well, no more!" Nigh hissed, crouching.

Rainstone flattened her ears, "What do you mea-" she broke off as he lunged for her. She unsheathed her claws and swiped at him, catching his ear, and felt a spurt of savage joy to feel the skin tear beneath her claws.

But then Night was on her and the joy was gone, his claws were digging into her shoulders and churning her soft belly as he forced her onto her back. Blood, warm and sticky, soaked out and into her fur as she cried in pain.

She vainly tried to claws his shoulders and push him off with her hind paws. But he was bigger and stronger and her claws seemed to do little damage, while the slope of the hill worked against her and

she could hardly budge him at all.

She began to feel dizzy, colors flashing in spots at the edge of her vision, the sharp pain dulling to just a rolling wave of sensations that included hot and cold, sharp and dizzy, and the dull nagging of pain that pulled at her skin and didn't slow.

Eventually, cold overcame the hot, sharpness overcame the dizziness, and the pain became stinging instead of nagging. She managed to see Night, standing over her, the glaze that had been over his eyes had disappeared.

She vaguely noticed his black fur was splattered red, *when did he grow red fur?* Her confused mind wondered. Her breath came in short gasps and Night was trembling so much that she wondered if he'd forgotten how to stand. Her mind like a cat underwater, unable to think clearly and moving slowly.

"What's wrong with you?" she breathed, her voice, slurred and distant, seemed to freeze Night's trembling.

"What have I done?" Night cried, his eyes glazing again, this time with pain and guilt. Then he fell on her, licking her frantically, though she barely felt him, her tired eyes had fixed on something else, a black shadowy figure with amber eyes.

I can't be dying yet, can I? Somehow she knew that the black cat would come for her when she died, *but that couldn't be now, could it?*

She breathed a sigh of relief as the black cat shook its head slowly, "*You will not die tonight, your place is not yet ready*." The black cat stepped closer to her and started touching her gently with its nose, wherever the cat touched, the tight pain fell away and she began feeling stronger.

Finally, the black cat stepped back and nodded her head, disappearing in wisps in a gust of wind. Rainstone sat up, Night staring at her in shock. "But how?" Night whispered, his eyes skimming over her pelt.

Rainstone looked down, although blood still covered her pelt, her

blood, she couldn't find a single open cut, just a lot of new scabs and scars. "I guess some cat still wants me alive," she murmured, turning toward Night, he was staring at her, perturbed, relived, and a little fearful.

"H-how did you do that?" Night stuttered.

Rainstone blinked, "I didn't do anything, we aren't the only ones who call this our home," she murmured. Night looked confused, but he must have realized that she, herself, didn't really know what just happened.

"Come on, lets stop leaning over this edge and go home," Night mewed, Rainstone shivered as he quoted the words she'd heard in her dream. *He may stop leaning over the edge, but I won't. Not now, not ever.*

Chapter 10: Silence For Silence

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Rainstone licked her paw, drawing it over her muzzle and washing off a bit of blood from the scratch that she'd gotten, courtesy of Snake. Who thought it was too rude of her to walk past him without acknowledging him.

It was about half a moon since Night had almost killed her and the shadowy black cat had cured her, turning all her wounds into scars. Neither of them had mentioned it, though a few cats had asked about the new scars on her shoulders, luckily, most of the scars were on her belly, which was mostly hidden from view.

Pepper and Whisper had returned, and then Cliff had left on his assessment, he was due back any day now. The only other change in life in the cave was that Nightly, a hunter, and one of Pepper's former trainers, had died. It was almost certain how he'd died, since his body was found at the base of a cliff-like slope where a faint trail had crumbled away and he'd had a young hawk in his jaws.

Obviously, he'd chased the hawk up the trail and then the ground had crumbled and he'd fallen and died. He hadn't had a mate, so there had been no fights over that, but one question came to Rainstone's mind at the incident. Why had the black cat saved her, but not Nightly?

She didn't know an answer, all her dreams since then had just been of stars and the word ancestor echoing through her mind, she felt like she should understand it, but she didn't. What did stars, tiny specks of light in the night sky, have to do with ancestors? Whatever ancestors were.

She sighed and shook out her fur, Night had acted better toward her since he'd attacked her. He had mated with her only once since then, and he spoke more kindly toward her. In turn, Rainstone tried to be more understanding toward him, but it was hard when Scamp

was always in the back of her mind.

She stretched, Night was gone at the moment, and she'd arranged for Pepper to take her out to 'collect herbs.' Really, he was going to train her, show her a few of the more complex hunting techniques that'd he'd learned just before he'd left on his assessment and he hadn't been able to show her yet, as they'd spent the time since he'd returned in refreshing both their memories.

Rainstone hoped he'd allow them to spar, as that was the only way for them to train in fighting. She swiped the last bit of blood of her muzzle and trotted over to Pepper who was padding away from Whisper. "Are you ready to go?" Pepper asked, his blue eyes glittering with nervous anticipation.

Rainstone nodded, skipping next to him out of the cave. She bounced in the direction of the dirt clearing. Enjoying the whistle of the icy cold air in her ears and the flash of the brown, dry grass beneath her paws.

She jumped down, panting and feeling exhilarated. Pepper appeared a moment later and she waited for him to catch his breath impatiently. When he finally had, he showed her the moves, she followed them with accurate intensity and after a few tries had it perfect and trained into her muscles.

"Can we spar for a bit?" Rainstone mewed, looking at the gray clouds that hung in the sky, hiding the sun and keeping the bare mountain cold.

Pepper sighed, he didn't like sparring very much since he always lost. "Okay, but we've got to be back soon or some cat will wonder where we are, and you still need to get your herbs," Pepper mewed.

Rainstone nodded enthusiastically, her whiskers twitching as she faced Pepper, her eyes narrowed with mischief. She knew him too well. When he lunged for her, like he would with prey, she easily bounced over his paws, not letting him trip her.

When her paws touched the ground, she whirled around and kicked out with her back paws, sending Pepper, who'd been turning toward

her, reeling away. She darted in and landed a few blows, although her claws were sheathed, the blows were hard and accurate, stinging her brother's muzzle and he cowered under her.

Then he twisted away and sprang at her side, sending her flying from his larger weight and she hit the sandy steps, he was always careful to hit her away from the chasm on the other side. Pepper darted toward her, his black and white paws flashing on the brown ground.

Rainstone forced her mind to turn and she darted toward him, sliding under his belly and pushing her paws at his front paws and he fell flat on his face, unable to protect his exposed back and Rainstone jumped on his back, pinning him with her wide paws. That was a trait characteristic in the cats in the mountain, they had wide paws that were good for gripping the craggily ground.

"I win!" she crowed jubilantly, a little louder then intended, and she raised her head triumphantly. Then she froze, every vein turning to ice and horror pulsing through her. There, on the rim of the dirt clearing, his paws hanging a little over the edge, stood a wide eyed Scamp, holding a mouse and shrew in his jaws.

Pepper followed her frozen gaze and tensed beneath her. Scamp stood there, bright amber eyes wide with shock and fur bristling. He stumbled away, looking dazed and scared, then his paw-steps became faster as he ran away.

Rainstone jumped off of Pepper and raced after him, fear pulsing through her paws. Was her friendship with Scamp strong enough to stand against this? Strong enough to make him lie to his leader about a cat he was just friends with?

She caught up to him, stumbling in the bushes where a lot of her herbs grew. "Scamp" she panted, darting after him, her paws skidding as she jumped past him and spun around in mid-air to land facing him from the front.

Scamp stared at her, his bright amber eyes tumbled with so many emotions that she couldn't hardly name them, though she got the feeling of fear and horror. "Rainstone!" Scamp wailed, sitting down

heavily and letting his prey fall. "You're going to get yourself killed!" Scamp cried, his eyes showed grief.

Rainstone's heart stopped. "You weren't going to tell, were you?" she whispered, looking up at the tall, lanky tom.

Scamp looked at her as if she was crazy, "No, I wouldn't be the one to sentence you to death, but other cats won't have a problem!" Scamp mewed, staring at her desperately.

Rainstone heaved a deep breath, "Just stay silent about it, and no other cat will know!" she mewed beseechingly, staring up at him pleadingly. She wasn't asking it of him from a pretty she-cat to a powerful tom, she was asking as a part of their friendship that may have evolved into something more.

Scamp sighed, "Its against the rules, by doing this I put Squirrel in danger!" Scamp mumbled. Rainstone remembered that occasionally, a leader might kill the mate of the tom in punishment for breaking the rules.

Rainstone twitched her ears "No cat will find out," she soothed.

Scamp's eyes sparked, "*I* found out, if it can happened once, it can happen again! Does Night know?" Scamp demanded.

Rainstone sighed and shook her head. Scamp stared at her, his bright amber eyes were thinking unreadable thoughts. "Look, Rainstone," Scamp murmured, suddenly looking somber. "I'll stay silent about it as long as you-" He broke off as Pepper broke through to them.

"Scamp!" he gasped. "Please don't tell! Look, I'll be leader before long, and then the secret will be secured!" Pepper burst out, his claws kneading the ground anxiously as he stared at Scamp pleadingly.

Scamp touched the smaller tom's shoulder with his tail-tip. "Don't worry, I'll keep the secret," Scamp mewed. Pepper sighed in relief, though he still looked nervous.

"Come on, Rainstone, lets find you some herbs," Pepper mewed,

looking anxious to leave Scamp, maybe before he changed his mind.

Rainstone waved her tail at him to show she'd heard, but she was still staring at Scamp. "You'll stay silent if I what?" she asked, wondering what he wanted her to do.

Scamp shrugged and nodded after Pepper, "You'd better go, I'll tell you later," Scamp mewed, grabbing his prey and heading in the direction of the cave. Rainstone looked after him and sighed, turning after Pepper as he once again called for her.

I wonder what he wants from me...

...

A while later, Rainstone was padding into the cave behind Pepper and a bunch of herbs in her jaws, because snow was expected soon, she was stocking up on everything she probably wouldn't need. Shaking her head impatiently, she pressed her cold nose to Pepper's cheek in goodbye and padded to the herb den.

She was met by a nervous and excited looking Whisper. "Oh! Rainstone! I was looking for you," Whisper giggled.

Rainstone's ears twitched, *giggled*? No, Whisper didn't giggle, not with nervousness, embarrassment, happiness, nothing. She always acted like she understood everything that was happening.

"Come in!" Whisper giggled again, curling her tail over her shoulders and pulling her into the herb den.

"Just wait a moment," Rainstone mumbled around the herbs in her mouth, then spat them all out, spluttering and coughing as she breathed in a leaf. Grumbling, she gathered them back together as Whisper shifted on her paws.

Then Whisper let out a chirp of joy and skipped around the herb-den, Rainstone was glad no other cat was in the den at the moment and couldn't see her erratic friend and say she was crazy. Dropping the leaves back by the pool, near her store, she turned to her friend who had settled down enough to sit. Though her eyes shone and her purr vibrated her slender body.

"What is it? Any cat would think you've gone insane," Rainstone muttered, brushing a herb leaf off her shoulder with her paw.

"I'm expecting kits!" Whisper burst out, her purr somehow growing louder.

That's it, she's gone mad! What kind of cat would be even remotely happy to bring a cat into this life? She glanced at Whisper, looking as if she'd never been happier, and she sighed. *I guess I've got my answer.*

"That's fantastic," Rainstone muttered.

"They're due in just over a moon," Whisper purred as if she hadn't heard the sarcastic edge in Rainstone's voice. The new queen licked her belly, which did indeed look slightly rounder then usual.

"Does Pepper know?" Rainstone asked. The kits would be her kin.

Whisper hesitated, "No, I'm planning on telling him tonight," the dark gray flecked she-cat mewed, her green eyes resting on her gently.

"Maybe you'll have kits soon as well?" Whisper suggested gently, knowing she was touchy on the subject.

Rainstone bristled. "You may be happy to have kits, but I never want to have one!" she hissed angrily. Whisper blinked, looking slightly taken back by her anger.

But Rainstone wasn't about to apologize, with a curt nod at Whisper, she set to organizing her herbs in their place. She heard Whisper sigh and felt her warm breath ruffle her ear fur before her paws steps echoed and fell away.

Rainstone screwed her eyes up tight, she couldn't even picture herself with kits! She was hardly more then a kit herself! Not even fully grown yet! She was only nine moons old, she wouldn't be full grown for awhile yet, possibly up too three more moons.

She shivered as the cold draft of the cave ran over her. In the warm season, it'd been welcome, but now it was getting a little too cold

for even her. She quickly set her herbs back in place and started padding out of the cave.

She halted as a shriek ripped through the air. *For goodness sakes! What now?* She bristled with irritation and looked toward the ruckus. Worry pricked her as she scented the heavy stench of blood and Night.

She trotted toward him briskly, he and Pebble were surrounded by all the other cats, their fur bloody and torn ragged. She wanted to demand what happened, but her job at the moment was to take care of Night's wounds. *I guess I will finally use some of my dusty old herbs.*

She slipped to his side, looking steadily into his tired gaze. "Alright!" the powerful mew belonging to Crag made the cats part and her jump slightly. "Leaf! Come help Pebble!" Crag barked for his mate and Leaf padded softly over to them, her white dappled fur gleaming in the gray light.

As the leader's mate, she was responsible in her medicine duties for all the toms who didn't have mates, and for kitting queens on the Fighter's side. Pebble didn't have a mate.

"Every cat give them space and be quiet!" Crag ordered, glaring at the cats around him. As he swung his head around, Rainstone noticed silver hairs on his muzzle. He was old.

Rainstone gave Night her shoulder and helped him stumble over to the herb-den, laying him down on the clean dirt floor near the pool of water. She sat him up against the rock wall, and started licking at his wounds, assessing his injuries.

He had several long scratches along the flank and one across the muzzle that was still bleeding. Then his back leg was slashed and half-way down his tail there was a mangled bloody mess that she didn't even want to start on.

She licked at the slash on his leg, it was the worst, and then placed a poultice of marigold on it and bound it with cobwebs. Then turning to his scratches on his flanks, she decided they didn't need

cobwebs, since they weren't bleeding any more and would probably be good with some tormentil root.

Chewing the root, she placed the poultice on the scratches, smearing it into the wounds. Night flinched and Rainstone shrugged, she didn't know how much it hurt, so she pretended that it didn't hurt much and Night was being a wuss.

Night seemed to be more alert, as if the sting of the herbs in the wounds and her gentle lapping was waking him up. He stirred beneath her paws, "How bad is it?" he mumbled, his words sounding disoriented.

Rainstone twitched her ear and glanced at his mouth, blood was seeping out of his mouth. "Did you bite your tongue?" she asked, frowning.

Night nodded slowly, his amber eyes glittering with slight confusion. "I don't remember doing that though," he grumbled. Rainstone shrugged, she didn't know what to do to help the bitten tongue, it'd heal on its own.

"So what happened?" Rainstone asked, licking her paws and swiping it over his muzzle, cleaning off the blood.

Night shifted his paws, "Me and Pebble got in an argument by the border and fell behind every other cat, then we were attacked by those same three cats that ambushed us at the base of the third mountain," Night muttered, too low for Leaf and Pebble to hear.

"Something's going to have to be done about them if they keep that up," Rainstone commented, wiping some marigold into the scratch.

Night flinched and screwed his eyes, whether it was from the stinging, or the strong scent of the marigold by his eyes, she couldn't tell. Then she started working on his tail, once clean, it wasn't as bad as she'd thought, it was just a bite and she wrapped it with horsetail and cobwebs.

Once she was done, Night and Pebble left to report to Crag, and she swept up the unused scraps of herbs and put the useable herbs

away. Leaf had already finished and left before she was done.

Padding out, she realized it was already nighttime and her belly grumbled in complaint of missing dinner. She glanced around, most cats had gone to their nests, though Rainstone spotted Night sitting with an unfinished jay bird at his paws.

Rainstone trotted over to him. "Good, you can finish this, I'm going to sleep early," Night yawned. "I'll see you later," he mumbled, padding to his nest, his movements stiff from his fresh wounds.

Rainstone wolfed down the bird and licked her whiskers. Because it was cloudy, she wouldn't be going out to meet Scamp. Her tail swished impatiently, *what* did he want from her in return for his silence?

She started heading for the fighter's den, but she halted as a tail touched her shoulder. Whirling around, she was unsurprised to find herself staring at Scamp. "Come on, we need to talk quickly," Scamp whispered.

Rainstone nodded, following him and stepping just outside the ivy curtain. She stopped and breathed in amazement, the moon was veiled, but just enough of its silver light shone through to show tens of thousands of tiny little specks of white floating down, like tiny bits of cloud falling softly and silently.

"What is it?" she breathed, her eyes focusing on one floating by her nose, she dabbed at it with a paw, and caught it. She blinked in surprise, it was cold! She breathed in excitement at the wonderful mystery, her breath sending a puff of frosted air out in front of her muzzle.

"Its snow," Scamp purred, his bright eyes glimmering with amusement, but there was a somber look in his eyes that worried her.

"Is everything all right?" She asked hesitantly.

Scamp sighed, his eyes filling with sadness. "Rainstone, I love you," Scamp murmured.

Rainstone's heart filled with joy, she knew it shouldn't, but it did. "I love you too," she murmured softly, stepping forward to touch her nose to his, gently caressing him. But Scamp stepped back after a moment.

"That's why I'm leaving," he mewed, his voice determined, even though it trembled with sadness.

Rainstone stared at him in shock, "What?! How can you leave us! How can you leave *me*?" she whispered.

Scamp shook his head, "This life... it isn't for me, I can't go on here, I can't watch you get hurt by my friends, can't stand to watch the unfairness," Scamp mewed quietly.

"So? I'm the one actually being mistreated!" She cried, though she knew Scamp well enough that he wouldn't go back on a decision like this.

"There's nothing I can do to stop it!" Scamp protested, "I want no part of this world, I have to find my own path, my own life, somewhere else," Scamp mewed, the spark of adventure appeared in his eyes. He was more excited then ever to leave.

"Then take me with you!" Rainstone begged, stepping at his paws and staring up at him beseechingly. Her eyes round with longing.

Scamp shook his head reluctantly, "Me disappearing will be suspicious enough, if I take the mate of the future leader, then they will hunt us down and probably kill Squirrel while they're at it. I have to go alone," Scamp mewed firmly.

Hot tears came to her cold eyes, "But what am I supposed to do without you?" she whispered, her life would be empty without him.

Scamp touched her ear gently, "I'll never forget you, but you'll be able to make your own life here, where I can't make my own life," Scamp mewed.

Rainstone began to feel angry, "You're just a coward!" she accused, "You're too scared to change anything, and too scared to tell any cat

but me that you're leaving!" she hissed.

Scamp just sighed and she continued "But you're wrong to tell me! I'll tell every cat that you left and they're hunt you down and kill you!" she threatened. She wouldn't actually, but maybe it'd be enough to keep Scamp at the cave, with her.

Scamp stared at her steadily, refusing to be pushed around by her. "If you tell them that I left, I'll tell them you're training how to hunt and fight," Scamp mewed back.

Rainstone froze. Was he *threatening* her?

"Rainstone, I'm asking you as a friend-"

Rainstone glared at him, "Didn't you just say we were more then friends? You're murdering our love!" she cried, sadness overwhelming her, like a dark wave just waiting to knock her down.

Scamp's eyes glittered and he touched her nose gently, his breath was warm and sweet. "I'm asking, as your lover, to exchange your silence for my silence," he mewed gently, in the gaze of his warm eyes, she felt like whatever he said was right and correct.

"Okay," she mumbled, forcing down the wails of loss she felt in her chest.

Scamp pushed his nose into her neck fur for a good long moment, letting her sigh in contentment and feel his warm fur and breath his familiar scent. Then he pulled away. "Goodbye, Rainstone," he murmured.

Rainstone's heart lurched, "You're leaving now?" she cried, half gone tears reappearing at the corners of her eyes.

Scamp nodded, "I have to leave now," he mewed, touching her on the cheek one last time.

Rainstone watched him pad away into the flurry of snowflakes. He soon disappeared into the cold world, and she'd never felt so lonely. Cold pressed her on all sides, but she couldn't tear her eyes from

where she'd last seen the wave of Scamp's black and red tail.

She swallowed hard, she wasn't going to cry, she wasn't going to wail like a lost kit. But she truly felt like she'd been abandoned and left to wear out the little life that her small body contained. She blinked, sniffling quietly.

She didn't see anything, she didn't think anything, she didn't feel anything, and not just because she was so cold her entire body was numb. As the moon appeared below the clouds, setting in the one clear patch of sky and setting the white snow aglow, she forced her frozen legs to turn back into the cave.

She stumbled, shaking the snow, which had completely covered her, off her fur and climbed into her nest with Night. Her body throbbed as it warmed up, the snow left on her fur melting into the moss, soaking it.

But she didn't care, her eyes were screwed closed and her chest echoed in emptiness. She had traded silence for silence, but what would she do now?

Chapter 11: Changes

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The three moons after Scamp's leave were dark and hollow. Rainstone's days were one tedious chore after another, acting, playing, helping, acting some more. As the cold season took firm hold, it blanketed the valley and surrounding mountains with snow so thick that it came up to her shoulders when she went out occasionally with Night or Pepper.

Not that she went out with Pepper much anymore, between the snow and his new kits and duties, they hadn't gone out training in a moon. Whisper had kitted nearly two moons ago, bearing two toms. They were named Blizzard, and Sun.

Two very opposite names for two very opposite toms. Blizzard, a white and gray tall little kit, was rather passive and had a good nature like his father. Sun, on the other paw, with a pelt the color of burning sunlight in the middle of the warm season, had a tongue sharp enough to scorch through anything and enough energy to pass him for a mini sun, bouncing around the cave.

Their view of she-cats were the only thing similar between the two. They'd adopted their father's lenient attitude, though they expressed it in different ways. Blizzard saw it as a wrong, and treated it as such. Sun seemed to feel having a she-cat would slow him down and he didn't want to hunt for the 'miserable little creatures.'

Luckily for him, there were no she-cats for them to take as mates yet. Rainstone liked Sun better then Blizzard, though she felt it ought to be the other way. The wild tom was a natural prankster and had a fun sense of humor, nothing damaging, but still a little crude.

Stick, Ice's and Storm's last kit, had become a Trainee about a moon ago, putting another cat in the training for the hunters. Rainstone flicked an ear as she saw Sun bounding away from the fighters den,

his tail straight up in the air and his darker paws swiftly carrying him toward the kit-den.

I bet he put those thistles I gave him earlier in some nests. Her whiskers twitched in amusement, she'd found a light in being his accomplice in his pranks, tiny bits of defiance against the all so superior toms.

Her heart trembled as she though of Scamp. His bright amber eyes only a fading memory, she couldn't even completely remember the pattern of his pelt anymore or the sound of his voice. The only thing that her mind refused to forget was his touch, soft and silky and healing her heart. She was scarred, but not out yet.

Scamp's leaving had caused a bit of a ruckus, it'd been assumed he'd gotten stuck at dusk out hunting in the snow and had fallen down something, dead to the cats. But then his mate, Squirrel, had been left all alone. Because of Nightly's death, there were no hunters without mates, unless they wanted to give her to a Trainee, which they didn't, but several of the fighters were without mates. So Squirrel had been appointed to Fox, Rainstone did not envy her.

As every she-cat had hear, Fox had killed his last mate because he'd found fetching her food too tiresome. Now Squirrel was in the fighters kit-den, expected to kit at any time. Rainstone twitched her ears again.

"You bratty little kit! Where are you?!" Rainstone watched through narrowed eyes as Boulder stumbled out of the fighter's den. The muscular solid gray time swung his head around, amber eyes glaring.

He'd recently gone into the den, as Rainstone sat thinking, and she assumed that he'd had the unlucky nest in which Sun had infected with thistles. "Where'd he go?" Boulder hissed, stalking up to her and looming over her small figure, her tail wrapped neatly over her paws.

"I didn't see for certain, but I think he hid in Crag's den," Rainstone lied, knowing very well that Crag and Leaf were mating at the current moment, she had heard Crag ask Leaf for a 'session.' She half-hoped they were done, half-hoped they weren't.

Boulder hissed, obviously not knowing about his leader's current occupation, and swung away toward there. She heard Sun giggle, from where he'd taken refuge behind her, under her fluffy tail. Rainstone smirked as she heard Crag's outraged yowl and Leaf's embarrassed whimper.

Boulder appeared a moment later, hollow-eyed from the words and threats his leader had spat at him. Boulder's tail and head were down. Rainstone half expected him too come over to her and claw her for the bad information, but he was too dazed and just stumbled back to his den. Rainstone spotted a few thistles still stuck in his gray haunches as he turned away.

Sun burst out laughing behind her and skipped around to her front. "Thanks Rainstone! You help make the best pranks ever!" Sun laughed, his amber eyes burning with excitement. Rainstone purred and cuffed him lightly over the ear.

"The secret is acting innocent," Rainstone purred, a laugh in her voice, though it was almost faked. Sun reminded her so much of Scamp, it hurt.

"Hey! Guess what I heard," Sun purred, bounding up against her legs.

Rainstone pricked her ears, she'd busied herself all morning in the herb-den to stay away from every cat. "No, what?" Rainstone asked, bending down to face the two moon old kit.

"Sandy's gonna have kits!" Sun burst out, leaping up and swiping at nothing.

Rainstone purred at the young yellow kit. He didn't understand the worry of this. Sandy was only seven moons, Mudslide must have mated with her as soon as she was six moons.

"Now me and Blizzard-"

"Blizzard and I," Rainstone corrected his pronunciation.

"Now Blizzard and I won't be the only kits in the den! I hope the kits like playing, Blizzard would rather hear stories then play," Sun's

chin set in a grumpy position, before lightening again.

"Hey, Rainstone!" Sun asked, crouching down before her, his haunches waggling and his tail whipping behind him. "Will you be my trainer?" Sun asked.

Rainstone twitched her ear uncomfortably, "I'm a fighter, you'll have a hunter mentor," she told Sun.

"But you were born a hunter, you're my father's sister!" Sun pointed out, straightening up, his amber eyes looking at her innocently.

"Yes... but I'm a fighter now," Rainstone mumbled.

"Then will you mentor a fighter kit?" Sun asked.

Rainstone shrugged, "Maybe one of Squirrel's," she mewed absently. *Not that I want to tell a kit all the rules she has too follow and everything she has to allow to be done, and teach her all about dusty herbs. I'd rather train a cat to fight!* Her belly churned with longing, if only she could be a real fighter. The days when she'd imagined it becoming a reality had long left her, but she still felt she was meant to fight real battles with tooth and claw.

She sighed, a long sorrowful sigh, one that was almost drowned out by a screech from the fighter's kit-den. Sun turned his head over his shoulder and pricked his ear to the kit-den. "What's that?" Sun asked.

"Sounds like Squirrel's kitting," she muttered, watching Leaf bound out of Crag's den, her eyes dazed from mating, as she slid into the fighter kit-den.

Rainstone pricked her ears, the howling wind had rose in strength, the light darkening. She sniffed the air, it had changed; fresher, moist and tinged with ice. It must be snowing again. She twitched her ears with worry as she saw a group of hunting cats and fighters return. Night was still out, patrolling with Pebble and Trip.

She watched Pepper pad into the cave, shaking snow from his black and white pelt. "Hey! Dad!" Sun called, his tail curling up in

happiness as Pepper trotted over to them. Pepper bent down to nuzzle Sun affectionately, his blue eyes warm as he skimmed his tail down Sun's spine.

"What's going on?" Pepper asked, as another muffled wail came from the fighter's kit-den.

"Squirrel's kitting," Rainstone responded, her tail flicking. "Being a little loud, isn't she?" she muttered. When kitting, she-cats had to muffle their scream's with moss, as to not annoy the 'tired' toms. Squirrel's screeching was loud enough that it still echoed around the stone cave, muffled only slightly by the patchy dirt walls.

Rainstone sniffed, peering over Pepper, snow drifted in under the thick ivy curtain that waved only slightly in the rushing wind. The stream that ran over the hole where they came and went had frozen a few days before, it still melted occasionally in the warm sun, but it refroze every night. A hanging sheet of liquid star shine at night.

"Is it snowing hard out there?" Rainstone asked as the snowy toms went to there dens to warm up and get away from the loud screams of Squirrel.

Fox paused beside them, his green eyes sparking with annoyance. He'd never been particularly pleased with Squirrel, Rainstone guessed he'd accepted her only to mate with her. "I'll go and shut up that good-for-nothing she-cat forever if she doesn't quiet down," he snarled.

Rainstone glared at him, but held her tongue. Pepper didn't seem to want to speak out either, but Sun had yet to learn sense. "How can you say that? She's obviously in pain, and you're wronging her for that?!" Sun's voice vibrated with anger and Rainstone felt a rush of pride.

Fox glared down at the bold little tom. "That mouth of yours will get you in some serious trouble some day, especially for a cat who *won't* be leader," Fox hissed, his eyes gleaming.

Sun flinched and Rainstone stiffened with anger. Because Blizzard had been born first, he would be leader, provided he was still alive

when Pepper died. It was cruel for Fox to mock the little tom on that!

Pepper had stiffened besides her, but he still kept quiet, probably to keep the situation from inflaming itself. But the look Sun gave her, to help him against this challenge, it wrenched her heart.

"Bold words, Fox, for a cat as old and fragile as you," Rainstone mewed slyly, bracing herself for his temper. She gasped as he swiped his claws across her cheek, she stumbled to the ground on her side, scrambling to her paws, but Fox placed a powerful paw on her shoulder.

"You still think I'm old?" Fox snarled, his face twisted and his claws pricking her skin until blood rose from the scratchy pressure.

Then the lanky red tom whirled around and made for his den, Rainstone scrambling to her paws. "Are you okay, Rainstone?" Sun whimpered, pressing his paws on her tail.

"Yes," Rainstone muttered, licking her paws and cleaning the blood off her face. The scratches weren't deep and had already stopped bleeding, they'd be fine.

"You shouldn't have goaded him," Pepper mewed, his eyes dark with worry.

Rainstone swatted at him with her tail, "I'd do it all again for that look on his face," she purred.

Pepper sighed and shook his head, his whiskers twitching in slight amusement. "Come on, Sun, lets go see your mother and brother, see you later Rainstone," Pepper mewed, padding away with Sun at his side.

"I'll talk with Fox later," Rainstone jumped and turned her head to see Night, snow frosted on his fur and whiskers, padding toward her.

"You look cold, is it snowing hard outside?" Rainstone asked, the question Pepper hadn't answered.

Night nodded, "Its not too bad at the moment, but getting heavier," he answered, sitting down and shaking the snow from his fur. Rainstone helped him groom the cold snow off his fur. She did it not because she liked him any more then before, but because she wouldn't get dinner until he was done grooming himself.

"What did you do to get Fox's tail in a twist?" Night asked between licks.

Rainstone twitched an ear, "He was mocking Sun, so I stepped in," she answered.

Night sighed and shook his head, sitting back. "You get too involved in these things, you need to learn when to ignore an insult and when to stand against it," her mate mewed.

Rainstone sniffed, "But Sun is a *kit*, taunting a kit after saying something very questionable is rather harsh," she grumbled.

Night twitched his ear, but when he spoke, it was on a different subject. "I heard Squirrel had her kits, Fox didn't look too happy," Rainstone nodded, the wails had stopped while she was grooming Night, replaced by shrill mewling. Fox had stalked to the kit-den, an expectant look on his face, then left a moment later with a look of disgust, snapping names she couldn't hear over her shoulder.

"Would you like to go visit them?" Night prodded, standing up.

Rainstone sighed and nodded, though she'd rather go get some food and quiet her rumbling belly. With the cold season had come less food, so cats only ate either at the beginning or end of the day, not both.

She padded over to the den, the place she'd first seen Night, thinking his amber eyes were the prettiest thing she'd ever seen. Now they just seemed dark and nightmarish, she tried not to look at them.

She'd never been in the fighter's kit den, and had thought it would be like the hunter's kit-den. It wasn't. The ground was stone covered with a thick blanket of moss and lichen, sheltering her paws from

the warmth-sucking stone. There was a gap in the stone wall, moss growing over the hole and letting only a bit of light glow through, tinting the light green.

Squirrel sat in a exhausted heap, hardly curled around the musty smelling bundles at her belly. Rainstone noticed a fresh nick in the queen's ear, crusted with blood. *Fox must have really been annoyed.*

She flinched when she saw why, two she-cats lay at the queen's belly, no toms. One of the she-cats was patched black and white, her tail black while all her paws were white and one eye was patched with black while the other was patched white with the alternate ears the same colors. The rest of her face was white and her nose was the palest tinge of pink.

The other she-kit was already looking slender, with a solid gray coat that had the faintest tinge of pink, like the clouds in the sky in the early morning. Her nose looked more purple, like a berry.

"They are very lovely," Rainstone murmured, she wouldn't admit it, but she thought they were very adorable and it sparked a feeling. She wanted kits of her own now.

No you don't! She told herself, but it didn't change that spark of longing in her heart. Night had a longing look in his sap colored eyes as well and he hummed quietly. "Lets leave her to rest," Night murmured in her ear.

"Wait," she stopped. "Squirrel, do they have names?" Rainstone asked. Squirrel nodded tiredly.

"The patched one is Half, and the other is Flower," Squirrel mumbled.

Rainstone frowned, *Half?* The name... was interesting. Sounded more like a tom's name to her, but Fox was weird, so it'd do. Rainstone then nodded to Squirrel and followed Night out, happy when he padded over to the fresh-kill pile, grabbing a rather plump hare for them to share.

Rainstone ate her share of the meal, idly answering Night's

questions about what she'd done that day, and faking a purr as he laughed when she told him about the prank she and Sun pulled. At least he found her exploits amusing, other toms would claw there she-cats for doing something so audacious.

She yawned and stretched out on her belly by Night's flank. Sleepy murmurs echoed around the cave, like the soothing murmur of dripping water, rising and falling in tone. She wondered why Night didn't go to their nest, every other cat had left and the moon must be close to moon-high, though the blizzard still roared outside, it sounded distant, unable to touch her warm fur.

But Night laid on his belly, paws tucked under him, eyes half-closed, ears pricked toward the entrance, tail flicking restlessly. "What's wrong?" Rainstone mumbled through a yawn, raising her head to blink sleepily at the entrance and fighting the lull of sleep.

The dark light flickered in the pounding snow, whirling around and dancing through the cold night to lay at rest on the frosty ground. Night shifted uneasily, "Crag went out just as the blizzard started, not wanting to stay where he could hear Squirrel, he hasn't returned yet," Night murmured in a low voice. Rainstone could see the fear in his eyes though.

She understood it, in the mountains, when it was so dark and snowing so hard... It was all too easy for a cat to lose its way, either walking off the mountain and falling to its death, or freezing in the snapping jaws of ice.

Rainstone shifted uneasily, she definitely wasn't ready to be the leader's mate, then it'd be almost a must for her to have kits, and if she couldn't... Then she'd be replaced and disposed of. Fear churned in her belly, and she sat up and copied Night's position, sitting vigil with him all through the blustery night.

She must have dozed off though, for when she jerked awake, she couldn't find what had awoken her. Night had fallen asleep, slipping into a curled ball at her side. She stood up, her muscles stiff from her crouched position.

She padded around in a tight circle, flicking her ears for what had

awoken her, for she knew she'd heard it. Then she stopped and realized that it wasn't what she'd heard, it was what she *hadn't* heard. The wind had stopped, the blizzard was over!

She sniffed the air, cold freezing her as she realized Crag's scent wasn't there, he still hadn't returned. Faint dawn light, red-orange, touched her paws, shimmering in under the ivy curtain. She prodded Night awake.

He yawned and stretched, "Is Crag back yet?' he mumbled sleepily, eyes still closed.

"No, but the blizzard is over," Rainstone mewed quietly.

Night's eyes flicked open and she stared at her, scrambling to his paws. "We have to go after him!" Night mewed desperately.

Rainstone nodded in agreement, but flicked her tail up as Night bounded toward the entrance. "Tell some cat where we're going first, the sunrise is red, that means bad weather," Rainstone growled. She'd studied the patterns of weather and knew the signs as well as any other she-cat who hardly had anything to do all dreary day long.

Night nodded briskly, "Fine," he mewed, not wasting any time in darting over to the fighter's den and pulled out a sleepy-eyes Boulder, Red at his shoulder, her blue eyes wide as Night spoke earnestly to them.

Then Night bounded over to the ivy curtain and Rainstone followed him quickly, slipping out into the frosty morning air. Her breath shimmered in front of her as she followed him down the snowy slope, the snow crumbling away beneath her paws.

Fresh powdered snow lay on top of the compacted snow beneath, so Rainstone was still stepping in snow that went half-way up her forelegs. Night padded in front of her, nose to the frosted ground as he followed the faintest scent of Crag.

The snow and the wind had blown most of the scent away overnight though, and Night stopped at a stony patch of ground,

clear of snow since it blew right over the little, slick, mesa. "I lost it!" Night growled, flicking his tail in annoyance, though Rainstone knew it arose from fear.

"Let me try," Rainstone mewed, pushing past Night, Pepper had taught her all his tricks in tracking. Because it was stone, there were no paw-prints, and it was clear of anything that might hold the scent better, but Rainstone touched her nose to a small patch of dirt along the smoothed out stone trail.

"I found it!" she called to Night, who was pacing around and trying to find the scent. He rushed over to her at her call and put his nose to the ground, his head coming up in confusion.

"I don't smell it," he mewed doubtfully.

"Its there," Rainstone promised, it was true that it was faint, but unmistakable, was Night just not used to tracking scents? He was a fighter, only looking for immediate scents on the border.

Night followed her doubtfully, but since there were no other leads, he had no excuse to not follow her. The scent trail led along the main trails, she flicked her ears at it gradually became stronger as they neared one of the few patches of trees.

Night pushed past her hurriedly as he picked up the scent, loping along the scent, where it began turning off the main trail. Rainstone raced after him, her paws only lightly skimming the snowy ground.

She slowed as she spotted Night ahead, standing stiff-legged under the skeleton of a willow tree where Rainstone's comfrey grew in the warm season. Her heart beat loudly in her chest, she was sure Night could hear it.

She'd caught another scent, a musty and harsh scent that sent claws of ice raking down her spine. She padded slowly over to Night, already guessing what she'd find. She brushed against her grief-stricken mate, wrapping her tail around his neck comfortingly and he leaned against her, as if too dizzy to stand.

"Why did this have to happen?" Night whispered.

Rainstone blinked down at the lifeless, frosted body of Crag. "Because life changes, and now you're leader," Rainstone mewed quietly, her voice surprisingly steady, she felt that the whole world was crashing down around her, but inside of her was a calm pool, not even rippling in the gusty wind of change.

"I don't want to be leader, not without Crag," Night whimpered. Rainstone stared at the new leader of the fighter's. She was now the leader's mate, and all she could think was; *I don't want you to be leader either, Night.*

Chapter 12: New Responsibilities

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Moons pass, changes come, whether you want them or not. Night became leader, receiving mingled support. One thing to understand is that the new leaders have usually never proved themselves capable before, so they have to earn their respect as leaders.

Rainstone was a credit to him though, making his path smoother at first, her quick wit and unmistakable confidence in her skills that managed to keep up, kept the fighter's from panicking as sickness broke out. She cured every single cat that got sick with a new mixture of herbs she'd discovered worked.

Now she'd been the leader's mate for three moons. Leaf, Night's mother, had been given Pebble as a new mate, as no she-cat could live without a mate. As well as that change, Crisp, her former trainer, had kitted, having just one tom, which Snake seemed pleased with.

It was a stocky little tom, would obviously be a perfect fighter, and looked much like his father. A black tom with large dark brown eyes. The only difference was that instead of brown hairs speckling his pelt, they were orange, like his mother's fur.

His name was Fish, which Rainstone had found an odd name, but Snake had really wanted that name, so be it. The tom had inherited his father's pride and his mother's quiet confidence. The only reason Rainstone had really paid so much attention to him was that he was the first kit she'd helped delivered.

Nothing could come close to that sense of wonder as she watched the new life take its first gasping breath and then instinctively go to its mother. She'd also enjoyed the flash of pure affection Snake had showed for his new son, his eyes softening from their usual hard,

suggestive look. He'd even purred and nudged Crisp gently with sentiment in his eyes. It'd just made her want kits of her own more.

She licked her paw and drew it over her ear, cleaning out a bit of herb juice she'd gotten on her pelt while helping Sun put some yarrow in Fox's food. Not enough to make him throw up, but enough to make him feel ill.

She glared as she saw the old lanky tom. His two she-kits sitting silently in the entrance of the fighter's kit-den. Their eyes hollow and they shivered against each other. *The poor little kits,* she thought sadly.

Squirrel was dead, the only death since Night's leadership. Fox claimed she'd fallen down a steep cliff while they were on a walk. But Rainstone had studied the body while getting it ready for burial, she'd seen the fresh claw marks. Fox had attacked his mate, angry about the two she-kits, and had either accidentally or purposefully killed her.

Night, of course, had believed her when she told him, but he decided not to punish Fox. Wasn't enough evidence, even if it had been against the rules, he told her. But he promised her Fox would never have another mate. She took comfort in that, but the daughters Squirrel had left behind wouldn't be able to.

She flicked her tail as she watched, her paws cold and her nose damp from sniffling. She had a little cold, nothing serious, but she'd been weakened by spending so much time with the sick cats. So she was stuck alone in the herb-den until she got better.

She almost was well again, she'd be moving back in with Night before a few nights more had passed. But Half's training wouldn't wait. The black and white kit was becoming a trainee at three moons, to become Cliff's mate, who was the youngest fighter. Flower would be Fish's mate when he was five moons.

She glanced as Stick trotted across the stone floor hurriedly, pausing by Pepper. The trainee had recently become a full hunter and was eager to show off his new position by talking to the future leader whenever he could.

Her mind drifted again, Sun and Blizzard would become trainees today as well, her paws itched. She wanted to train one of them! She knew just as much about hunting as Pepper, and no cat would say he was incapable of training!

She snorted, resentment churning in her belly, rolling over her, wave after wave, like storm clouds being heaved along the gusty wind. She sniffed as she saw Hawk and Droplet, her parents dozing by Hawk's den. She knew Droplet was expecting kits again, she could scent the slight change and see the belly rounded slightly.

She glanced up as Night entered the cave, shaking snow off his legs, though sunlight glowed pale yellow from behind him. She padded up to him, swiping her nose clean with a paw before nuzzling him briskly.

She'd grown a bit more closer to him, almost to where they'd been on the assessment, but she still didn't love him. Though she was thankful that ever since he'd been leader he hadn't mated with her, feeling it was too unprofessional. Whatever worked for him worked for her.

"So how are you feeling today?" Night asked, his amber eyes slightly concerned.

"Better," her voice rasped since she hadn't talked to any cat that day. She cleared it loudly, "I'll be healthy again in a few days," her voice smoother.

Night nodded, "Are you ready for your first Trainee?" he asked, leading her over to the stone wall. No water ran down it now, but the water in the base was frozen, they cracked it in the morning to get water, but it froze over again every night. You could feel the cold increase as soon as you put your paw by the stone, it was practically ice.

She nodded at Night's question, though she didn't really want to train to kit and remind herself of all the rules, especially the ones she broke. She'd dragged Pepper out for a sparring match not long ago, just before she got sick, looking back, that was probably what had gotten her sick.

She helped him lick the melting snow off his thick black fur. The sun dropped lower, the light turning more orange, though she noticed that the sky wasn't particularly red, and she'd noticed earlier that there were rings around the sun.

As Night headed over to Hawk she padded to the ivy curtain, peering out, she saw dark clouds on the other side of the tallest mountain peak. The breeze rushed to her from that direction, smelling strongly wet and like the bare mountains on the other side of the surrounding mountains.

There'd be a blizzard, or she was a mouse.

She hurried back to Night as he and Hawk called the cats together. She listened dully as Hawk appointed Sun and Blizzard trainers, he gave them the three same mentors; Scratch, Ice, and Mudslide. When she saw the tom who'd been a kit with her step forward, she wondered when he'd matured, his eyes sparkling with intelligence and his fur smooth and the gaze respectful to all.

Then as Night called Cliff and Half forward, named them mates, and Rainstone as the trainer, she saw how insecure the little kit looked standing by the tom that was the same age as her trainer. And Cliff looked slightly perturbed by the small size of the kit.

The meeting was over quickly, and for once there was no celebrating, probably because of the lack of food and the cold and sickness that had crept in like a dark fog into every cat's mind.

Rainstone stepped to Half's side, she looked up at her with her hazel green-brown eyes. "How can that cat be my mate? He's so big!" her voice squeaked out like a kits voice did.

Rainstone shrugged, Half was almost four moons old, she'd grow quickly, and she wasn't exactly a small kit, she'd be bigger then her anyways. "Just be nice, do what he wants, and I'll explain more tomorrow," her advice ended in a stifled cough and weariness and chills pulled at her.

She stumbled over and flopped down on her belly by Night, wishing the floor wasn't stone, it sucked her much-needed warmth from her.

She looked at Night, he was eating a mouse, he'd gotten her a shrew, and she'd eaten it earlier.

"See you tomorrow," Night mewed as he yawned, the sunlight fading to gray twilight in the small time before the moon would rise. Her mind drifted to the stars as she was left all alone in the cave. She hadn't had a dream since the cold season had set in, she wondered if it had just been the result of imagination. *But then how was I healed?* That was the one bit of proof to kept her believing.

She shook her head and stumbled to the herb-den, settling into the mossy make-shift nest she'd made out of the clean scraps from the nests of the sick cats she'd taken care of. She sighed as she curled down, trying to find some scrap of warmth, but found nothing but hollow emptiness. Her new responsibilities were rather hard and tiresome...

She blinked open her eyes, her breath catching in her throat and her heart thudding in her head as she saw dozens of colored stars in front of her, the white light flashing with the colors of fur and eyes. Confusion filled her, she felt like stumbling, but her paws were rooted to the snowy spire she stood on, elevated far above the valley.

Then slowly, the shapes forming in liquid like movements, the stars became cats, toms and she-cats, kits and elders, skinny and muscular, every kind of cat that could be imagined. The colors of pelts and eyes varied, but none two were exactly the same.

Her eyes began picking up a few certain that were closer to her, *That one looks like Crisp! Except he's a tom... her father perhaps? And that one looks like me!* Her eyes widened as she saw a smoky blue-gray tom with the exact same shape of the ears, only his shoulders were broader and his eyes were amber. His scent, mostly of the wind and stars, held just a trace of what reminded her of herself and her mother...

Are these... my ancestors? Is that what it means? The cats who have gone before? Are they the stars? She could see starlight licking at their paws and fur and shining in their eyes. Understanding flooded her along with joy, she finally knew what it meant! But what did

this mean for the cats back in the cave?

Then, in a blinding flash that forced her to close her eyes, she opened them and found herself on a thin bit of rock like the spine of a cat, the drop on either side pulled at her fur while the harsh wind, though not tinged with ice, cut through her fur and threatened to sweep her off her paws.

Her eyes fixed on an imposing figure padding steadily toward her, the black fur not moving in the wind. It was the same black cat that she had seen in her dreams! "Who are you?!" Rainstone called, raising her voice above the wind as she latched onto the stone with her claws.

The black cat, know only two eagle-lengths in front of her, halted and stared at her. Amber eyes looking at her, the scent reached her. It told her the cat was very old, smelling of ancient dust and wind, it also told her it was a she-cat.

"My name, though unused for seasons, is Song," the words, though barely breathed, echoed louder then thunder, the wind falling away suddenly around her.

Rainstone stared at the black she-cat, Song. "Why are we here?" Rainstone asked, her voice trembling with barely refrained excitement. She'd finally found out who the mysterious black cat was!

"I have come to warn you, you will never fix the cats in the cave," The words Song spoke made her heart fall. Did she not make any difference? Did these dreams mean she was nothing special? She knew that she thought she'd been special, that she'd wanted to be special, to be the hero, to fix the cats in the cave and be remembered for her great effort. Was that never to happen?

"Why not?!" Rainstone mewed hotly, shame heating her ears as if she was already a failure.

Song stared at her, unblinking. "Follow your instincts and take up your new responsibilities that I am giving you, and maybe your legacy won't be lost..." And with that, the wind started up again,

Song whisked away in its torrent. Rainstone yowled, scrunching up her eyes, mingled emotions rushed through her, joy, relief, anger, sorrow, shame, loss, the feelings of discovery and failure.

Rainstone gasped awake, she was sitting in her nest in the herb-den, what was left of her nest was messed up, while scraps were flung everywhere. She twitched her ears, even without the nest, she didn't feel cold, not like she'd felt the day before.

She touched her nose, it was cool and moist, not wet and warm like the day before. Her breathing was clear and the slight heaviness on her chest had lifted. Then it came back down, her dream pounding into her memory. She wasn't special, she'd never accomplish anything special, she'd never fix anything...

But Song's other words... "*Follow your instincts and your legacy will live on*," Maybe she wouldn't be able to fix anything... but maybe she could start it. With a renewed surge of confidence in her beliefs and actions, she quickly swept up her scattered nest, she'd dump it out later.

She trotted out, spotting Night stretching just outside the leader's den by the rock wall. She bounded over to him, purring as she skidded to a stop. He purred back, his eyes lightening. "You seem cheerful this morning," he purred, touching her nose.

Rainstone nodded, her heart felt light and her paws hardly seemed to touch the ground, she couldn't tell him about her discoveries or her sense of purpose. But she could tell him she wasn't sick any more. "I'm all better now!" she purred, nuzzling his neck.

Night's purr echoed in her ears as he touched her head so gently. Rainstone felt a burst of emotions, but the one thought that surfaced was, *I wish this was Scamp*. Instantly, a wave of loss and resigned sadness swept over her, bringing her back to the cold and difficult world.

She stepped back, letting Night choose which cats would patrol and when, the entire border was patrolled twice a day, one in the morning, then after sun-high. Two patrols at a time, one doing one half, the other doing the last half.

She watched him drag cats out, Half stumbling out after Cliff, tripping and falling as her sleepy paws scuffed at the round stone. Rainstone winced as Swallowtail tripped over the kit, he snarled at Half, who shrank back in fear as Swallowtail scratched her black ear, not cutting through the skin, but enough for it to sting.

Half bounded over to her, tripping over her own black tail and tumbling head-over-paws and landing in between Rainstone's wide, soft paws. "Oh, Rainstone, its you," Half sighed in relief, scrambling to her paws, shaking her black and white fur out.

Rainstone nodded, feeling a prick of sympathy when she looked down into Half's round, scared hazel eyes. "Are you okay? Swallowtail didn't hurt you much, did he?" Rainstone asked, rasping her tongue over the scratch.

"N-no, I'm fine," Half stammered.

Rainstone nodded, "Then lets not waste any time, we can get right to training since we're both awake," Rainstone mewed, trotting over to the herb-den. Half followed her, her tail dragging.

"Aren't we going to get something to eat?" Half complained.

Rainstone shook her head, "We only eat once a day in the cold season," she reminded the kit, though her own belly was grumbling.

Half muttered something under her breath. "Can't we eat now?" the kit asked.

Rainstone sighed, "Only your mate, Cliff, can get you food, one of the rules you'll need to learn," she mewed, though her small bit of patience was rapidly growing thinner, just waiting to snap.

Half didn't say any more as they padded into the herb-den. "What's that smell?" Half asked, wrinkling her nose, "It smells like sickness," the kit sneezed, "And dust."

Rainstone twitched her ears, the smell of sickness was washed out, only a fain trace from her own sniffling was left, but she doubted the kit could smell it. "Its herbs, you'll have to learn how to use every single one of them," Rainstone mewed, twitching her tail in a

horrible attempt to be excited.

"No thanks, I want to learn how to fight! Like Fish will!" Half purred, her tail curling over her back and her eyes staring at her expectantly.

Rainstone narrowed her eyes, lashing her tail impatiently, what had Song said? "*Take up your new responsibilities*." Was this part of it? Putting her ideas into this small cat to pass on to her trainee so that the idea grows? *If that's it, then it could take generations before anything happens!*

She snorted, she'd figure it out later, now she had to put her paw on Half's retreating tail. "You don't get to learn to fight, you get to learn how to heal and about all the rules," Rainstone growled.

Half lashed her tail, "That sounds stupid," the kit grumbled, staring up at her hostilely.

"Then take it up with Swallowtail next time you annoy him," Rainstone napped. "You have no power," she snarled.

Half fluffed up her fur, though her hazel eyes were sad, as if she already knew. "Did my mother not follow the rules?" Half suddenly looked tired and sorrowful beyond her age.

Rainstone couldn't keep back the pity for the pathetic scrap of fur in front of her who had been wronged. She wrapped her fluffy tail around the small, patched figure. "Your mother was a friend of mine," Rainstone knew that wasn't exactly the truth, Squirrel had been more friends with Cinder, and had suspected something between her and Scamp and been a little cold toward her.

"And she never broke any of the rules, Fox is a... troubled cat," she mewed, not wanting to say anything bad about a tom when she wasn't sure who was listening. "And he wanted tom kits, so when Squirrel just had females... He took his anger out on her, he attacked her and during the fight she accidentally fell and died," Rainstone murmured softly, not actually quite sure if Fox had done it accidentally or not. But no need to trouble the kit.

Half sighed, "At least I know my mother didn't do anything wrong..." it seemed to lift a weight off the kits shoulders and she looked brighter. "So what were you going to teach me about herbs?"

Rainstone purred to herself and started showing Half all her herbs, the inquisitive kit chatting non-stop in her ears. And they both ended up laughing over a joke, the cold unable to touch the bonding trainer and trainee. Rainstone purred and thought to herself, *maybe my new responsibilities aren't so bad after all...*

Chapter 13: Shadows

Chapter 13: Shadows

"This is goldenrod, its pretty rare, but is great for healing wounds," Rainstone mewed, pulling out the rarest herb she had to allow Half sniff at it.

The black and white kit was now five moons, almost finished with her training. Today was the last day. "What happens when I'm done training?" Half asked as Rainstone put her scanty bit of herbs away. As the leader's mate, she used more herbs then before. Not that she'd complained, she enjoyed anything that could keep her paws busy.

"Nothing. Cliff, your mate, is already a fighter, so you just go on and use what I taught you in your life," Rainstone answered. Half wouldn't be going on the assessment around the mountains, pity.

"But I want to do something! Something important!" Half protested, her claws gouging the cold dirt floor.

Rainstone shrugged, flicking a bit of dirt off her paw. "Tough, I'd like to do a lot of things as well, but that's how it is," she growled.

Half flicked her tail mutinously. Rainstone knew she hated the rules almost as much as she did, but she wouldn't say so out loud, her black and white ears were crisscrossed with scars from when she'd voiced her doubts. She'd been clawed more then Rainstone, Cliff wasn't as forgiving as Night.

Speaking of which, his scent drifted to her along with the cold scent of snow. "You're dismissed, we won't be meeting again to train, you've learned all I have to teach," she mewed curtly.

"Will there be a ceremony?' Half asked.

"No," Rainstone answered curtly, turning away from her former

trainee, disappointment tugging at her paws at the thought of not spending time with Half again. The annoying little cat gave her enough distraction to get through the cold, lonely days of the cold season, she'd never forget her little friend.

She touched Half's black ear gently, "I'll miss teaching you," she murmured, her heart pulsing in her chest.

Half's eyes glimmered in amusement, "Even if I am a snotty little owl?" Half teased, using the name Rainstone had so often called her.

Rainstone smirked, "Yep, even a snotty little owl can become a friend," she purred, flicking Half's cheek lightly with her tail.

She turned and padded out of the den, her ears twitching as she heard Half's last words echoing after her. "I'll miss your training as well, even if you're an irritable old jay."

Rainstone purred and padded toward Night, he was padding toward her, his paws clean of snow. As the cold season waned off, the top snow would melt then refreeze during the night, leaving the snow icy and slick.

"How was your day?" Night purred, touching her ear as she brushed her muzzle along his cheek.

"Good, I finished training Half today," she reported, pressing against him as they walked to his den, formerly Crag's den. It still held a trace of Night's father.

Inside the dirt and stone ground was covered with lichen that grew soft and feathery and a large round hollow in the back was full of fresh feathers and moss. It was a very comfortable nest. "So how was your day?" Rainstone asked as they settled in their nest, grooming each others fur.

"It was fine, I've got to go out again later though, Pepper told me that he thought he scented those rogues again, but he should be back before long," Night mewed. Rainstone's heartbeat sped up and her ears pricked. Could she possibly get a little sparring match in

with Pepper later? They hadn't been out together for what seemed like moons, though it'd only been a few days.

She missed the days when they spent all their extra time together, but now Pepper had kits and was busy being instructed by Hawk on leadership problems. As her thoughts had wandered, Night had began speaking again.

"Do you think it'll ever happen?" Nigh was mewing.

Rainstone stared at him dumbly, annoyed that she hadn't been paying attention. "Do you think we will ever have kits?" Night pressed impatiently.

Rainstone shrugged, "I don't know, we've mated more then enough times, but it just hasn't happened," she mewed discouragingly.

Night's eyes flickered with a bit of fear. "I need you to have kits," he muttered.

Rainstone's ears twitched, "Why? So I won't be thrown out?" she growled.

"Yes!" Night mewed, exasperated.

"But you're leader, can't you change something?" Rainstone groaned.

"No! both leaders have to agree, and I doubt Hawk will turn against the rules," Night growled. "He's a stickler for rules if I ever saw one," her black mate muttered.

Rainstone shrugged, "We can try again later, I want to go see if Pepper's about," she mewed, getting out of the nest.

Night sighed, his eyes worried. But Rainstone just swept out of the den, spotting Pepper and Whisper sharing prey with Blizzard and Sun playing nearby. "Now you be the mouse, and I'll be the hunter," Sun was mewing, his amber eyes gleaming as Blizzard crouched and shuffled along, squeaking like a mouse as Sun leapt at him skillfully.

"Are you kits or Trainees?" Rainstone purred as she swept past.

"Now Rainstone's the mouse!" Sun yowled, leaping for her and hooking her legs out from underneath her and Blizzard jumping on her back. Rainstone purred as she fell to the ground, the two small toms squirming on top of her, their eyes bright with delight as she batted at them with her wide, soft paws.

"Is that anyway to treat your kin?" Pepper mewed, his voice light with laughter and Rainstone looked up at his blue eyes that glimmered with amusement.

"Help me!" she groaned as she rolled on her back, Blizzard pulling at her tail while Sun wrestled her down.

"I think you can help yourself," Pepper laughed, stepping back a pace. Rainstone rolled her eyes and sat up, pulling her tail away and bundling Sun off her chest. She stepped in front of Pepper, leaning toward him.

"Can we take a quick walk?" she murmured. Pepper sighed and nodded, the amusement falling from his eyes to replaced by weary agreement.

"Lets go now, while most cats are resting in between patrols and hunting," Pepper muttered, having a quick word with Whisper before leading her out of the cave.

She breathed in the fresh air, hitting her like a slap after the warm and stuffy air of the cave. But now it didn't burn her nose like it had earlier in the season, it was starting to warm up and she felt the weak warmth from the sun over the chilly breeze that blew down the mountain.

They padded down the slope, Rainstone racing down it, letting her paws slide expertly down the icy snow while Pepper scrambled to keep his grip. She tripped near the bottom of the slope on a bit of slushy snow and fell with a yowl face first into a drift of soft powdery snow.

Her teeth chattered as the freezing snow chilled her to the bone.

Shivering, she pulled herself out of the drift as Pepper laughed at her from behind. She turned to him, snow clumped on her fur so that she almost looked white.

"You wouldn't think it was so funny if it was you!" glaring, she grabbed a paw-full of snow and flung it at him. She let out a yowl of delight as it hit him in the face and he stumbled, spluttering.

"Oh yeah!" Pepper shouted, purring. He grabbed a paw-full of snow and flung it at her. She squeaked and dodged, the snow landing at her paws.

She threw more snow at him until he was as white as she was and she was even whiter then before, but she was so warm that she didn't mind, all her problems melting away in that short time of bliss.

She fell on her back, snow puffing up around her, she felt warm through and her laughter rang through the air like the cry of an eagle. Pepper fell down beside her, his black patches mostly clumped under snow.

"I-I haven't h-had t-that much f-fun since I-I was a trai-trainee!" Pepper panted, purring besides her, his eyes narrowed into laughing slits.

Rainstone purred and with one paw slapped a bit more snow on Pepper's face. He laughed, spluttering and wrapped his tail around her paw. She laughed and pulled her paw away, getting back to her paws and looked around.

During the snow fight they'd actually went in the wrong direction, though not far. "We better hurry up, or we won't have time to do anything," Rainstone mewed.

Pepper nodded as he got to his own paws, shaking the snow from his fur. Rainstone did likewise, retaining her dark gray fur. She brushed off a few bits of snow off of Pepper's black patches with her tail and he swiped a bit off her head with his paw.

"Lets race there!" Rainstone mewed, bounding away in the right

direction, her paws kicking up clumps of snow in her wake. Pepper pulled alongside her and she huffed as she struggled to keep up, her paws sliding over the snow that flashed with sunlight.

She'd spent most of the cold season in the cave, but Pepper had hunted every day, so his stronger muscles pulled past her, leaving her trailing, panting, and struggling to keep up. Pepper had already leaped down into the clearing, pushing the snow off a patch of dirt as she finally arrived.

She flopped on her belly on a bit of clean snow, closing her eyes against the glare of the sun and struggling to gulp air into her burning lungs. "Are you alright?" Pepper purred, poking her with a paw.

Rainstone groaned, her lungs burned and the sun seemed to bright. "When did running become so hard!" she moaned, swinging herself to her paws.

"When you stopped exercising," Pepper mewed, poking her with a paw again. Not that she was fat, she was even skinnier then before with the reduced food, her skin clinging to her more tightly.

"More like when we got a lack of food," Rainstone grumbled as she followed Pepper into the cleared dirt patch.

She trained all her focus on Pepper, struggling to push all her instinctive and learned training to her paws, though she had trouble recalling every single move. *How do I twist again? What timing does that move require? What am I doing with my paws in that move?* Confusion flooded her as Pepper leapt.

She tried to dodge, but he caught her tail and she stumbled, not much, but enough for him to leap at her exposed back before she could turn. She rolled into the ground, trying to get back to her paws, but his heavy weight on her shoulders prevented her from doing anything but rolling, with him landing on top when they stopped.

She huffed as he got off, purring. "Looks like you're a little out of practice," he purred.

"Don't sound so happy about it," Rainstone muttered, furious for letting herself be beaten so easily. "Lets go again," Rainstone mewed, wanting to prove to herself that she could still fight.

Pepper crouched, facing her. But she wasn't going to allow him to make the first move. She lunged for him, sliding for his legs on her belly which skidded over the layer of snow. He moved out of reach, but Rainstone twisted around and lashed out, hooking out his front legs with her back ones.

She rolled to her paws and leaped at him, hitting his shoulder and the already unbalanced tom tumbled onto his side, his legs and tail flailing. She leapt at him, but he caught her with his four paws and flung her away with his greater strength.

She huffed as she fell in a snow drift, struggling to get out only to find Pepper's paws pressed on her chest. "I win again!" Pepper crowed.

Rainstone glared at him as he let her up, shaking snow off her paws. Before Pepper had time to look back at her, she leapt at him, landing on his back and after a few moments of struggling pulled him to the ground.

"Now I won!" she shouted, anger still pulsing through her with a savage rush of exhilaration.

"Hey!" Pepper yelped, "You're clawing me!" he cried. The shock in his voice made Rainstone realize she'd unsheathed her claws and had scratched him, though he wasn't bleeding.

"Sorry," she muttered, stepping off of him.

Pepper glared at her and ran his tongue over his shoulders. "And you didn't win, that was cheating!" Pepper protested.

Rainstone sighed, she knew he was right, though in a real fight it wouldn't have mattered. "Lets try again," Rainstone pressed.

Pepper looked uncertain, "I don't know, its getting late..." he murmured, the sun had fallen behind the mountains, the shadows would lengthen quickly and it'd be dark.

The air had gotten colder as well, the wind dying away as the clouds drifted lazily over the sky. "Just once more," Rainstone begged.

Pepper sighed and nodded. Rainstone purred and faced him, fur fluffed up and gaze narrowed. She held her breath, her eyes trained on his muscles as they flexed and slid under his smooth black and white patched pelt.

She saw them strain, pricked her ears to hear the intake of breath. All her senses focused on this fight. Now! She saw his paws fly off the ground and saw them aim for her chest. She was already moving, her paws sliding as if on air and slipping her out of harms way.

Pepper landed on his front paws and twisted on his back ones as they hit ground and turned toward her again. She leaped toward him as she lunged for her, her paws swiping at his muzzle as she twisted out of reach of his flailing paws. She landed gracefully and spun around, wind rushing in her ears as she raced toward her brother who had stumbled after her blow.

Leaping at him from the side, she twisted her paws around his and tussled him to the ground, smothering him with her fur and planting her paws firmly on his shoulders she had pinned him and won!

She purred loudly, looking down into Pepper's eyes that gleamed with annoyance and happiness.

"Good fight," he puffed as she let him sit up, the dark gray light shadowing his fur.

"Thanks," she purred, flicking a bit of dirty snow off his back.

Her eyes traveled to the ground, their black shadows playing on the ground at their paws, stretching forward till they reached the chasm. Rainstone's eyes flew to a moving shadow just in front of her own. Two ears, flicking. Two cat ears, moving away hurriedly.

Her eyes flew to the ledge over their training ground, but not cat

sat there, though her heart thudded in her chest. She leaped up, eyes scanning the shadowy landscape. The moving shadows of the sparse trees waved and the cloudy sky continually became darker and made it impossible to make out just one shadow.

"What's wrong?" Pepper asked, leaping up besides her, eyes stretched wide as he peered into the darkness.

Rainstone scented the air. Cat. But she could hardly scent anything but hers and Peppers, the only other scent was so faint the cat could have passed by days ago. *Not with all the melting and freezing, the cat was here today.*

Was the cat watching them? Her belly churned with unease, nervousness pricked at her fur. "No cats been here recently but me and you," Pepper reported, he'd been drawing in the scents as well. Although she hadn't told him, he had guessed that was what was worrying her.

"G-good," she stammered. She looked at the fleeting shadows. Oh! Why were there so many?! And why were they so dark? All shades of black on the dark gray land. It was an impossible game, the snow was hard on top so there were no paw-prints and no scent was recent.

So where did those shadowy ears come from? And what if there had been a cat there? Her unease grew as she allowed Pepper to lead her back to the cave, not noticing the conspicuous pair of eyes gleaming from the shadows.

Chapter 14: Retribution

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Rainstone followed Pepper up the slope to the cave. They'd be in trouble, cats were supposed to be back in the cave before sundown, they were late. But that wasn't what was worrying her, those cat ear shadows she'd seen at their sparring match...

She had a bad feeling something was up. It laid like a cold lump in the pit of her belly, making her feel sick. Her paws were numb as well as her nose, but her ears were thawed enough to hear the odd silence coming from the cave. Usually, the chatting of cats could be heard from the bottom of the slope. But all was silent, no shadows moving beyond the ivy curtain.

Pepper was flicking his tail uneasily, and his fur was starting to prickle as he noticed something was out of place. Rainstone pressed by his side, her head resting just above his shoulder as they paused outside the entrance.

It was still silent, though the scent of cat wafted out to them strong and fresh and tinged with anger. She shared a horrified glance with Pepper. "Oh no... they know..." Pepper whispered, his blue eyes staring at her with anguish.

"You have to leave!" Pepper hissed suddenly. "Before they kill you!' he begged.

Rainstone stared at him, wondering how the ground wasn't crumbling beneath her paws. Dizziness made it hard to think as she tried to process what they thought was happening. "Are you made of ice?" a growl made her raise her head to stare at their father, Hawk.

He glared at her furiously and his glare slid coldly to Pepper. "Come in now, or Whisper won't be breathing," Hawk growled.

Rainstone's belly lurched, was her friend at risk because of her? Shivering uncontrollably with fear and shock, she followed Pepper, who had started hissing angry questions at Hawk as soon as Whisper was mentioned.

He was cursing as they padded into the cave, cats lined up on either side, one was Hunter's, the other was Fighter's. Night stood at the very end on the Fighter's side, a spot next to him must be for Hawk. His amber eyes, which had been emotionless a moment before, turned bright with relief and sadness as his gaze rested on her.

Rainstone's mouth became dry and it felt like she was made of stone. She was conscious of the dozens of eyes burning into her pelt and the snickers and sinister glances cats shot each other. *They're happy to have some excitement.* The thought was almost disgusting. Except her level of disgusting had already been taken to a new level then most cats.

Her eyes swiveled, almost on cue, to Whisper, the silver she-cat's darker flecked pelt was smeared with blood. She was held pinned between Ice and Spider, her eyes glazed with pain as she crouched on the floor, her blood dripping in scarlet drops.

Rainstone swallowed hard as anger pulsed beneath her fur. *She innocent! She's done nothing wrong! And neither have I!* All of a sudden, she found she could move again and was jerked out of her fearful state.

She stared around defiantly, letting her true face be seen. Her dark eyes sparking with independence and smoldering fire. Pepper was hissing at Ice and Spider, they stood staring at him contemptuously. Hawk pushed Pepper away from his mate with a glare, warning him with a word that if he made any sudden movements Whisper would be killed.

They were herded forward until they stood in front of the two leaders. Pepper's gaze was fixed on Whisper, but Rainstone glared at Hawk and Night angrily. Night's tail flicked, his gaze was guarded again, probably for the cats he was leader for.

He stepped forward, his black fur blending in with the shadows of

night. "Pepper, you have been accused of training a she-cat to fight. And, Rainstone, you have been accused of learning to fight, which is punishable by death," Night's voice trembled slightly at the end, but no cat noticed but her.

Rainstone raised her head, "Nonsense," she responded, flicking her ear dismissively.

Night blinked, opening his mouth, but Hawk broke him off. "Liar!" he spat, his fur fluffed up angrily, "Cliff saw you! He wouldn't lie, but *you* would," Hawk growled.

Rainstone shot a cold glare at Cliff, who was watching with an amused and smug expression. The mate of her trainee being her downfall... harsh. She turned her angry look on the leaders.

"So what?" she demanded impatiently. Her tail flicking.

Night looked confused but Hawk looked venomous. "You broke the rules! You can't do that! She-cats are too dangerous to know those things, every cat knows they're half-crazy," Hawk spat.

A few cats looked uncertain, but no cat protested. Rainstone just rolled her eyes, "If any cat is crazy here, its you," she growled, glaring at her father.

Hawk snarled at her, but stepped back to allow Night to step forward. "Pepper?" Night asked calmly, "Would you like to say something?" the black leader asked, tilting his head the side to block his eyes from the gaze of the other cats. Rainstone could see he was desperate for Pepper to find a way out of this.

Pepper turned his sparking blue eyes on Night. "Let Whisper go! She's done nothing wrong!" he snarled. Hawk glared at him coldly, but Pepper glared right back, making Hawk look a little surprised, then pleased, as if he'd found a particularly good piece of prey.

"Pepper? Do you swear on your mate's life that you did not train Rainstone to fight? We already know the truth, so we will know you are lying," Hawk mewed. Some cats cackled their agreement, and Rainstone swept her glare around them, silencing them.

She'd see the sharp look Night had given Hawk, she knew they were lying about knowing the truth. Hawk was betting on Pepper's love for Whisper that he wouldn't lie and risk her life. Pepper was in such a state that he couldn't perceive the lie.

Rainstone opened her jaws to slyly tell him, but Fox, who'd been standing closest to her, bowled her over. Her mouth was stuffed with tail and she choked as she gasped for breath. His claws tore her skin, blood staining her clean fur. She tried to screech in agony as he dug his claws into her shoulders until they scraped her bone.

But her mouth was full of fur and Fox's greater weight made it impossible for her to throw him off, especially not when so many fighters stood around her. Pepper was staring at her in horror, she understood. He felt like he had to choose between the life of his mate and the life of his sister.

She caught his eyes and tried to relay, *Save Whisper! I'll be fine! I'll find a way out!* Pepper seemed to understand, though he still looked scared out of his fur for her. Pepper faced Hawk gravely.

"I did train Rainstone how to fight and hunt," he mewed quietly, but it echoed in the silence, the only sound coming from Rainstone's muffled gasps.

"I knew it!" Hawk purred triumphantly. "Uh... release Whisper," Hawk ordered. As Ice and Spider stepped back, Whisper stumbled over to Pepper and he met her, purring with relief, though his eyes stayed worried as he glanced at her.

Hawk had watched them coldly, then flicked his tail and they stepped apart. "Pepper, as punishment for your crimes, you will be denied your right to leadership, as will your first-born son, Blizzard. Instead, Sun will become leader after me," Hawk announced.

Rainstone glanced at him, able to breath since Fox had pulled away his tail and claws, though he kept a firm grip on her shoulders. Pepper looked almost relived, she remembered that he'd never really wanted to be leader.

She couldn't help but glance at Sun, who stood by his brother, their

eyes glazed, though she could see how angry they were. Their anger not directed at her, but at the cats that had harmed their mother and father's sister.

She met Sun's burning eyes, they spat fire and he was almost glaring. Not at all the normal look of a cat just promised leadership. She wondered if he'd heard at all.

Fox got off her and shoved her to her paws. She stood up, stumbling a bit from her wounds that stung like fire. He tripped her and pushed her in front of Hawk and Night. She rolled over, her blood smearing the stone.

She stood up, facing them with the same face of defiance, though she was exhausted. Night looked impressed, but Hawk was less so. "Rainstone," his voice was colder then ice, "In punishment, you will be put to death, immediately."

Rainstone blinked as the yipping, cheering, and snarls sprung up from the toms behind her. For a moment it was just her and her father, staring at each other with uncontrollable fury. The ground cracking between them and splitting into a chasm so large she knew they'd never reach each other again.

Then the moment was passed and she was being seized and thrown on the ground, a tom holding each of her legs out stretched out like a flying squirrel. She stared up at Night, he was supposed to give the death blow.

He padded over her, moving with dreamlike slowness. He unsheathed his claws and slid them through her fur, reaching up for her neck. She stared at him, eyes wide and daring, was he really going to do this?

She gasped in sudden understanding, was she really going to die at this moment? She supposed this was her retribution for trying her luck... it obviously wasn't on her side.

Then suddenly Night froze, his eyes stretching wide with excitement, an idea flashing in his amber eyes. He stepped back and flicked his tail. "Stop!" he commanded. The cats holding her down

flooded away and silence fell as every cat stared at Night.

Hawk glared at him, "You aren't thinking of letting her get away with this?" the hunter leader snarled. *My own father, advocating for my death*, she thought dryly.

Night looked at him with annoyance, "Of course not," he mewed, flicking his tail toward her contemptuously. "She will die, but not now. I will not kill my kits, one which could possibly be leader," Night mewed.

Rainstone didn't move, she understood crystal clearly. By saying she would have kits, it'd give her time to get away. *Smart, how did I not think of it myself?* Though she knew she'd have to act fast, it wouldn't be long before some cats noticed she actually wasn't expecting kits.

Hawk narrowed his eyes, staring at her coldly from where she'd heaved herself to her paws. "Droplet, check her," Hawk ordered abruptly. Obviously he wasn't taking Night's word for it.

Her mother padded toward her, Rainstone stared at her. She hadn't talked to her mother for seasons, though the light of love had never faded even a little from when she was a kit, her soft gray eyes still shone bright. She breathed in the familiar scent, it was even mingled with milk as she came closer to kitting.

A thought crossed her mind, *why doesn't Hawk just give leadership to one of his new kits?* Then she remembered, he didn't know for sure if he'd have any tom kits, he might change it when they came.

She felt Droplets smooth paws feel her belly and she suddenly froze. She wasn't expecting kits, she knew she wasn't, would her mother lie for her? Droplet sat back after a moment with a sigh, Rainstone stared at her beseechingly.

She met her mother's soft gray eyes, begging her silently. Droplet gave the smallest of nods, her eyes drenched with fear and sorrow. "She's expecting kits," Droplet announced.

Night's ear twitched and he gave her a questioning glance. She gave

a tiny shake of her head and Night nodded.

He turned to Hawk, "You should trust me more, I wouldn't lie for a she-cat," he sniffed.

Hawk nodded with a growl. "Fine, when you've kitted, you will be killed. Until then, you will remain under guard in the fighter's kit-den," her father growled at her.

Rainstone was then abruptly thrown in the specified den. It was empty, she supposed the other kits would be moving to the other kit-den which had been empty. *Why not just put me in there?* she wondered, licking her wounds.

She knew why, this one was more easily guarded and the entrance more easily seen. She stalked around the small space. It was warm and had a milky tang to it. She padded around, waiting for something to happen, though she was quite tired.

She pricked her ears at the light pattering of paws. She sighed and touched noses with Night as he padded in. "Nice thinking," she muttered in his ear, too quiet for whoever was guarding to hear.

"Its better then you not thinking at all," Night retorted annoyingly. "Didn't we make an agreement? That you would follow the rules and I'd fix things up with Pepper?" he pressed.

Rainstone flicked an ear. "I do recall something like that," she muttered guiltily.

Night flicked his tail, "You realize you've ruined it? Pepper won't be leader now and no cat will want to change anything after this, there will be no support even if Sun becomes leader," Night growled.

Rainstone closed her eyes. *She'd ruined it all! She'd wanted to help, but she'd ruined it!* She sighed, was that what Song had meant? Was that her path had taken her away from fixing things? Was she originally meant to fix it? And she'd failed with her impatience?

Misery and failure crashed down on her, threatening to sweep her away. Even her life would be gone soon, no longer then half a moon

before every cat realized she wasn't expecting kits.

She stared at Night, "I'm so sorry," she whispered, "I ruined everything with my idiotism," she whimpered.

She was almost surprised when Night pressed against her and purred gently in her ear. "Don't worry about that, right now we've got to focus on getting you out of the mountains," Night mewed.

Rainstone nodded, glad he was able to take charge, she didn't know if she could to save her life. *Funny, that's exactly the situation I'm in.*

"First, we've got to get you expecting kits," Night mewed, padding back and forth.

Rainstone glared at him, "Really? Its not going to happen you know," she snapped.

"I've been thinking-"

"That's dangerous," Rainstone interrupted, but Night swept on.

"You've only not been able to have kits because you don't respond to it, you're like stone, that's the real reason I stopped mating you know," Night mewed.

"So what do I have to do?" Rainstone snapped, not liking where this was going.

"You have to relax and enjoy it, go with the flow, and don't stress out afterwards," Night mewed.

Rainstone flicked her ears, not knowing if she could do that. "What else do we have to do?" she knew getting her to expect kits must be to buy time.

"That's all you need to know, the less, the better, but don't worry, I'll work it all out," Night mewed, looking at her with such confidence she found she had no doubt that he'd keep up to his word. He loved her.

Her heart tugged, it wasn't much, but it was more then she'd ever

felt. She stepped forward and pushed her muzzle against his, forcing the feeling to grow until it blossomed through her.

She focused on that feeling, ignoring him rolling her onto her back... ignoring the mating. She relaxed and purred softly, focusing fiercely on the feeling even when it was all over. But it hurt that when she closed her eyes, instead of Night's pine sap eyes, she saw Scamp's bright sunset ones.

I'm glad he can't read my thoughts... glad he doesn't know I'm pretending he's Scamp to get through it... It'd break his heart and he doesn't deserve that. Its not his retribution, but mine.

Chapter 15: Missing Or Dead

Chapter 15: Missing Or Dead

Half a moon passed. Rainstone found she was expecting kits, lucky her. The days were cold and dark; lonely as well. She was either hungry, aching, or moody. Always uncomfortable, never happy. Not many cats visited her, though Sun would still come and ask her for prank ideas in an attempt to cheer her up, which he usually just barely managed.

She'd tried to dream, tried to reach Song, but the closest she got was a whiff of the scent. But her belly was beginning to be heavy and the air was starting to warm. Life went on even if she wasn't a part of it. That's why she was shocked when Night suddenly visited her and told her something that turned everything upside down.

"I leave tonight?" she gasped, eyes wide.

Night nodded, "I've got it all arranged, you need to get out while you have time to settle yourself somewhere to have our kits," Night mewed. His eyes softened with sorrow and wistfulness as he stroked her growing belly with his tail.

She felt guilty that, by leaving, she was depriving Night of his kits. She'd also been anxious, could she care for their kits by herself in strange territory? What if something happened? She'd be all alone. Even if she didn't like the cave rules, the safety and protection was well welcomed.

"Where will I go?" Rainstone mewed quietly, worry biting her belly. Images of the stretches of endless territory she'd seen from the mountaintops daunted her.

"You'll head west, toward the setting sun, between the last two mountains we visited," Night mewed.

Rainstone flicked her tail, "That's where those rogues live," she

muttered.

"But you know how to fight now," Night mewed with an edge to his tone. It was because she knew how to fight that this was happening.

Rainstone shrugged, "Fine, when tonight?" she asked, trying to shake off her doubt.

"Sun is assigned to guard you this evening... When every cat has gone to sleep, Pepper will come and get you," Night mewed.

"You won't be getting me yourself?" Rainstone asked, faintly surprised, and hurt.

Night shook his head regretfully, "Hawk is already suspicious of me," he murmured quietly.

"But he's suspicious of Pepper, is it a good idea to drag him further into this?" Rainstone asked.

"It has to be this way, we can't trust any other cats," Night mewed impatiently.

"What about Blizzard?" Rainstone asked.

"He's just as bad as Pepper, and I've already briefed Pepper on what he has to do," Night mewed.

Rainstone felt a flicker of unease, she didn't want Pepper or Whisper to get in any more trouble for her. "Fine," she agreed curtly.

Night flicked his tail, "Pepper will take you to the border in that direction, then you will be on your own," Rainstone saw the flicker of fear in his eyes and she purred reassuringly.

"Its okay, I can handle myself," Rainstone mewed quietly.

Night nodded, brushing his chin along the top of her head as if she was still a kit. "I'll come with Pepper to say goodbye and give you some extra prey. You should rest until then, you'll need your energy both for yourself and for our kits," Night mewed softly.

Rainstone felt a rush of affection for her mate. "Thank you, so much," she whispered, licking his ear.

Night purred, trembling a little. He lowered his head to stare straight in her eyes. "When you leave, I'll have to take another mate, so that we can have kits and my legacy will go on," he mewed carefully.

Rainstone felt a surge of envy flash through her momentarily, but she dipped her head to hide it. "I know," she mewed, willing her voice not to express emotion, though she was shaking on the inside.

"Do you have a cat in mind?" she asked quietly when she'd gotten control of her voice.

"I think I'll take Tinge, she reminds me of you... And Sleet won't mind waiting for a new she-cat, he's gotten bored of her by now," Night mewed casually.

Rainstone blinked, why didn't she love Night? He obviously loved her, would things have been different if she had? But now... she'd never get the chance to find out... Never get the chance to know what happened to her kin and friends, never seeing Whisper, Sun, Pepper, and even Night again made her heart cry.

But she had to leave. Had to find a new path. For her sake, and her kits. She'd start her own family, watch them grow, maybe she'd even find Scamp... The thought gave her courage.

"I'll see you when its time," Night mewed finally. Rainstone nodded and curled down to sleep, not noticing the anguished look of love he gave her as he padded out.

Night's POV

Why didn't she love him? She cared for him, but it wasn't love. Not like he felt for her. He remembered the first time he'd seen her. Dark gray fur ruffled and torn, dark blue eyes wide with admiration. He'd felt a spark, a longing to have her gaze at him with something more then admiration.

That had never happened, her admiration turned to loathing almost immediately, chaffing at the life she'd been set on with no choice. Why couldn't she have just been happy and content? He took good care of her, kept the other toms away, gave her more freedom then any other she-cat other then possibly Whisper.

But no, he'd seen in her eyes as they stood on every single mountaintop the width of her gaze. She saw further, imagined more, and understood more then any other cat. She was different, she seemed to know things she shouldn't have. Had a hunger for things she couldn't have here.

And that word... *ancestors*. It'd struck his heart, he'd asked every cat in the cave what it meant, but no cat knew. He could tell from the way she said it that it was important, powerful, maybe dangerous... It'd scared him as much as it had enthralled him.

Now he lay in his round nest of feathers, it felt empty without Rainstone. Her defiant personality which commanded respect had filled *him* with admiration. Her dark eyes, the gleaming black gaze, pulled all his attention to her.

She never gave up, never stopped believing, never stopped trying. But she'd tried too hard. And now he was going to lose her and his kits. *Will I see them again?* He swore that he wouldn't give up the hope that Rainstone would return someday until he saw her dead body with his own eyes.

But now the shadows were all he could see and the sounds outside his den had ceased. It was time for Rainstone to disappear. As he got to his paws, he already felt as if something was missing.

End of Night's POV

Rainstone jerked awake, blinking groggily at the blackness that persisted to press down on her. In a moment, she remembered what Night had told her and she jumped to her paws, recognizing Sun, Pepper, and Night standing in front of her.

Night dropped a large mouse in front of her. She twitched her ears as she heard a roaring. "What's that?" she asked, eating the mouse

ravenously.

"A blizzard," was the grim reply.

Rainstone shivered, would she not be leaving tonight then? "Are we still doing this?" she muttered.

It was too dark to see any inclinations they might have made. "Its up to you," Sun mewed finally.

Rainstone hesitated, if she didn't leave now, she might not get to leave at all. "Okay, lets go." She mewed, refusing to let her voice show doubt.

After a hasty and sorrowful goodbye with Night and Sun, she thought she'd miss Sun the most. Pepper led her out of the cave and quickly across the snowy valley. She remembered the last time they'd been that way, having a snow fight which had left them laughing carelessly.

Things had changed so fast. The blizzard, although it blew her around like she was a feather, wasn't snowing too heavily and a faint gleam of the full moon gave her enough light to see Pepper's white patches in front of her.

All too soon they'd stopped at the border, a stream that had refused to freeze trickled along with a faint splashing. "So, what now?" Rainstone asked, her teeth chattering.

Pepper turned toward her, his blue eyes gleamed with fear and sadness. "We have to part, just walk in the stream for awhile so as not to leave a scent," Pepper mewed.

Rainstone blinked, "Just like that?" she asked, her voice trembling, and not from cold.

Pepper blinked slowly, "Yes, I'll scratch myself up a bit and say that when I took you on a walk you attacked me and I killed you, then your body fell in the stream," Pepper mewed.

Rainstone felt cold, "So I won't be missing, I'll be *dead*," she mewed, shivering. She dreaded to think what Whisper or any of her friends

would think about that. *What about Half?* she shivered, Half would be broken. The kit had already gone half-mad over her sentence to death.

"T-Take care, Pepper. I'll miss you," Rainstone's voice broke with sadness as she looked at her littermate for what was probably the last time. She felt as if nothing could go well if she looked away, and everything would be alright as long as she held her brother's gaze.

He always comforted me, always helped me, tried to keep me safe, did what I asked. He talked with me when I was mad, he kept me from doing wrong things, he let me rant to him about his friends and our father. He always put me before himself. If only I could have done the same...

But there was nothing she could do change anything now. She had to leave, or stay and die. Even a chance at life was better then nothing. Pepper leaned in and licked her ear. "Maybe we'll see each other again some day," he mewed, her own sadness reflected in his voice.

Rainstone purred lightly and pressed her nose to his. "Watch for me in the stars," she murmured. Then she padded into the stream. She'd thought her paws had already been numb, but the stream... It must have been colder then ice!

She shivered, her paws pulsing with pain that made her groan. Almost as soon as she'd left Pepper behind in the shadows, the snow picked up until she could hardly see a whisker length in front of her. She slipped on a loose stone, gasping as her haunches went under.

She let out a cry and jumped out, but the snow was hardly any better. It matted on her wet paws and haunches until she was stumbling blind and senseless in the blinding snow.

Am I going to die anyways?! It seemed so, her heartbeat slowing in her chest and her eyelids getting heavy. She knew that if she fell asleep in such cold conditions she wouldn't be waking up.

The snow piled up as she struggled along, virtually blind. She felt as if she was being buried alive, the snow almost to her belly. *At least I haven't walked of the mountain, yet.* Her grim thoughts were interrupted by a faint sound... a yowl, a familiar yowl.

"Song?!" she called through the roaring storm.

She couldn't make out the words, but she thought she saw a flicker of a black silhouette at the top of a rise. She turned toward there, stumbling on her lifeless paws.

By the time she reached the place, Song, or the cat, had disappeared. *Great, now I'm even more lost!* She thought angrily. Then she stiffened, looking over her shoulder.

"Hey! You! What are you doing outside in this weather?! You must be crazy! Get in here right now or you'll freeze to death!" the voice definitely wasn't Song's, it was young and impatient, biting with annoyance.

But Rainstone stumbled toward it thankfully, getting the heavy scent of cat rolling toward her along with warmth as she felt the cat brush against her. "Wait, what?" the cat mewed in her ear, though Rainstone couldn't see it. "Are you expecting kits?! You really are crazy to go out on a night like this," the cat muttered, pushing her forward.

"I-I had to leave," Rainstone mewed, blood dripping from her dry mouth. Had her mouth become so cold and dry that it was bleeding? She was in really bad shape... Not that she had enough energy to care.

The cat had snorted and then pushed her down into something. Rainstone stumbled, feeling warmth, like a wall of pain, rush over her as she fell through into a dug out in a small hill who's entrance was mostly covered by rock with only a thin slit to scramble in and out of.

The pain in her body made her purr, it meant nothing was frozen, except for her right fore-paw, it continued to be numb. The cat, a she-cat, slid down besides her and started licking her fur the wrong

way as she flopped down on the floor, her purr of relief echoing.

She was barely conscious enough to feel two more pairs of tongues and paws start helping her rescuer. But it felt good, better then anything had felt in days. And she was too tired to think about her grief of leaving all she knew.

"So, what's your name?" the she-cat asked as she drifted to sleep.

"Rainstone," was the almost inaudible reply.

"What's your story? You aren't just out in a blizzard like this for fun," the she-cat continued.

Rainstone managed to twitch her ear in annoyance. She just wanted to sleep! Couldn't the cat wait until later? But the more conscious part of her mind knew the she-cat was trying to keep her awake until she was warm enough.

"I'm missing... or dead, either story works for me," Rainstone murmured.

The she-cat hummed an answer, "Well, you sleep now, we're discuss more tomorrow," the she-cat murmured, curling down by her side to keep her warm.

Rainstone sighed and was asleep in a heartbeat.

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"She failed! The cave cats will be completely lost before three generations have passed!" a cat yowled, its voice echoing around the stone hollow where all the ancestors of the cave cats gathered.

"We have to get her to go back!" one cat yowled.

"No! Then she will be killed and there will still be no hope!" another cat argued.

The argument went on in such a manner. Then a cat stood up from where she'd been sitting on the round rock in the middle of the red-brown stone hollow.

The cats quieted. "Song?" one cat asked from the bottom, "What do you think?"

Song hesitated before replying. "Just because Rainstone isn't with the cats doesn't make it impossible for her legacy to change something," Song mewed quietly, though it rang with authority.

"But she hasn't done anything for the cave cats but drive them further apart!" a cat protested, the tom's claws scraped on the floor.

"Jump," Song mewed coolly, "This whole problem sprouted from yours and your brother's decisions, don't act like its all her fault," Song mewed.

Jump hung his head, ashamed. "I *meant* that her kits may change something if she doesn't, her legacy living on in her kits," Song explained. "'Legacy,' can mean many different things," she mewed.

"What do you suppose we must do to help then?" a cat asked.

Song stretched herself to full height. "I will follow Rainstone out of our territory, I will continue to guide her to where she needs to go, as I did tonight," she mewed, flicking her tail at the icy sheeted rock by her paws where an image of Rainstone curled next to her mortal rescuer in warmth and safety.

Yowls of protest broke around her. "You can't leave us alone!" a cat cried.

Song flicked her black tail in annoyance, "Are you mice or cats? You will be fine without me, keep watching, bringing the dying cats here, and trying to help in every possible way, we will break through to them one day," Song mewed encouragingly. They didn't know that she was clinging to her own words as much as they were.

A few cats still muttered mutinously and most cats looked unhappy or uneasy, but no cat protested. Song leaped down and padded away, ready to start following uncharted skies to help Rainstone. She paused and looked over her shoulder at the many cats, the hundreds of pairs of shining eyes, stars sparkling at their paws and fur.

"I will return someday," she promised. "But now Rainstone is missing in the world, and she must be found again soon. Before she becomes dead to the world." And with that, Song leaped out of view and was lost from sight.

Chapter 16: Beginning Again

Chapter 16: Beginning Again

When Rainstone woke the next morning, she saw she was staring into three pairs of eyes. Two green pairs and an amber pair. She laughed half nervously, half self-consciously. "Hello," she mewed, slightly confused, and blinked up at them.

They sat back and allowed her to roll herself onto her belly. She stiffened as she realized something was wrong. She shook her front right paw, she didn't feel anything and it lolled uselessly. "What's wrong with my paw?!" her voice shrill with fear as she stared at the wide, soft paw.

"I think its frozen, you won't be able to use it again," the voice, although edgy, was toned with sympathy. Rainstone looked up at the she-cat, she recognized her as she cat who had brought her to the den last night.

But that wasn't what made Rainstone gasp. It was the same she-cat she'd fought while traveling on the final assessment with Night! The she-cat's unruly dark brown fur had golden brown dapples, as if she was spotted with dust.

"My name is Dusty," the she-cat introduced, then swept her tail toward the two other cats, the two toms they'd fought. "And this is Pummel and Stretch," Dusty mewed, a little annoyance in her voice as the two toms shouldered each other for the better spot.

"Hello!" they chorused. Rainstone dipped her head awkwardly, wondering if they recognized her. Pummel was the gray and white tom with green eyes, Stretch was the skinny brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

The two toms were slightly smaller then Dusty, making her think they were younger, close to her age, the two were probably littermates. But Dusty had the same shade of green eyes as Pummel,

she wondered if she was from an older litter.

"Hey! I know you, you crossed through our territory last summer," Pummel mewed, his green eyes gleaming.

"Summer?" Rainstone echoed.

"Warm season," Stretch inserted.

"Yeah, you were with that fighting black cat," Pummel chatted on. Rainstone shot a quick glance at Dusty. The she-cat definitely didn't look surprised. She already guessed.

"Yeah," Rainstone mewed slowly.

"Well, what are you doing back here?" Stretch asked, leaning his striped muzzle toward her.

"Er... passing through," Rainstone mewed.

"Why were you traveling so late at night? And in a blizzard?" Pummel asked, jumping up and putting his paws on Stretch's head, forcing his brother to the ground as he leaned in closer.

"Good cover," Rainstone mewed, shuffling back a pace as Stretch pulled backwards and Pummel rolled forward.

"So, Rainstone, why did you say you were missing or dead?' Dusty spoke up, eyeing her with curiosity and wariness.

"Because I'm supposed to be dead to some cats, and missing to others," Rainstone growled, not really wanting to fully explain why that was so. Lucky for her, Dusty didn't seem inclined to ask.

"I've heard rumors of the cats in the caves, bad things really," Dusty shot a glance at the two toms who had started bickering, as if she didn't want them to hear. "I hear they treat she-cats poorly," Dusty murmured in her ear.

Rainstone gave a curt nod, still not wanting to say anything. Dusty turned away from her, "Well," she mewed, addressing the two toms, "If you have enough energy to fight, then you have enough energy

to hunt. And hurry back, Crystal is visiting us today," Dusty mewed to the two toms.

They nodded and headed out, pushing for who got out first though the small slit opening. Dusty watched them with an affectionate look in her eyes. Was she really their mother? "Your family, right?" Rainstone mewed, not wanting to make an assumption.

Dusty nodded, giving her pelt a few quick licks. "They're my younger brothers, they came with me when I moved into the mountains. Our sister, Crystal, stays with mom, but comes and visits once at the full moon when the weather's good," Dusty explained.

Rainstone nodded, "Are you full siblings? Or just half-siblings?" she asked.

"Half-siblings, we had different fathers. I never knew mine, and Pummel, Stretch, and Crystal's died of sickness not long after I moved into the mountains," Dusty mewed.

Sounds like a half-broken family. Rainstone thought. Though Dusty didn't look broken, in fact, she looked more at ease then Rainstone had ever imagined possible. *They have a home*... loneliness pulled at her. She already missed all her friends back in the cave.

Was Sun pulling a prank now? Was Night out on patrol? Were Pepper and Whisper gossiping? *But you're not alone, you have your kits*. She reminded herself, she could feel the little kits moving about in her, awoken by her sudden movements.

A sudden thought pricked her. "Where does your mother and your sister, Crystal, live?" she asked.

"Just outside the mountains," Dusty answered.

"Does it take long to get there?" Rainstone asked.

"Crystal usually manages it in once day... And so do Pummel and Stretch when they visit mother,' Dusty answered.

Rainstone twitched her ears. "Do you visit your mother?" she asked.

"Rarely, I never got along well with her... I don't think she likes having me around," Dusty murmured.

Rainstone shrugged. "How long does Crystal usually stay, before heading back?" she asked.

Dusty tilted her head to the side, "Only a few days. She might want to leave sooner though, before another blizzard rolls about, it will be hard enough for her after the one last night," Dusty mewed.

Rainstone pricked her ears, for the first time realizing that only a few faint flurries showered down outside, weak sunlight shining on the fresh powder. She stood up, trembling as she tried to put weight on her frozen paw. It shook and turned out, so she balanced herself on three paws, her frozen one held limply.

"How am I supposed to get anywhere with this paw?!" she hissed angrily at no cat.

Dusty flicked her muzzle with her tail. "You'll have to learn to use it a bit. If you get it to a limp, it'll work, well enough, anyways," Dusty mewed.

So they spent the morning trying to figure out how Rainstone could set her paw down in such a way that she could limp, or more exactly, fall forward, with her other paw to catch her. Rainstone hissed, it was tiring and awkward, but she supposed she'd get used to it. She just hoped that her paw would get better, though Dusty said it wouldn't ever get better.

As long as it doesn't get worse, Rainstone thought with annoyance. By sun-high Stretch and Pummel had returned, each with two pieces of prey. The two littermates tussled over a rabbit while Dusty got a mouse for her and Rainstone.

Eventually, the two littermates shared the rabbit and quiet fell as they ate. But it wasn't a tense quiet like in the cave, it was a comfortable silence, filled with a sense of family. Rainstone had never felt it before, only a flicker of it when she was with Pepper.

Just as they finished eating, an unfamiliar call sounded from

outside the den. Rainstone pricked her ears while Dusty led Pummel and Stretch out, purring, into the cold frosty air. Wanting to know what was going on, though she'd already guessed, she limped to the entrance and peered out.

Because the den was dug into the ground, she only saw four pairs of paws, the new set was a pair of fluffy white paws that blended in with the snow.

A moment later she tumbled back as the four cats hustled into the den, shaking snow from their paws and pelts. The new cat was a majestic long-furred white she-cat with three small black spots. One on her front leg, one on her head that stretched up onto her ear, and the last and largest, on her right flank and spine. Her eyes reminded Rainstone of sun shining on ice, except they were blue, like blue ice.

"Oh, Crystal, this is Rainstone, she was stuck in the blizzard last night and is passing through," Pummel mewed, pushing up against the she-cat. Rainstone realized how alike their bodies were, the same tight muscles and lengthy tails. They were obviously kin.

"How are you?" Crystal greeted her cheerfully, her eyes shone with friendliness.

"I'm well, how are you?" Rainstone returned, purring politely.

"I'm doing well too!" Crystal purred, then she turned back to her family and started giving them news. Rainstone began to feel like an intruder on the family and shifted awkwardly.

When they'd finally finished chatting, the light was beginning to fade and Crystal said something that caught her attention. "I'm only staying through the night, mother wants me back soon," Crystal mewed, blinking apologetically at the disappointment on her siblings faces.

"Hey!" Stretch spoke up, his fur bristling with excitement. "How about me and Pummel go see mother? We haven't been there for two moons!" Stretch mewed. Pummel yowled his agreement.

"Hey, why don't you come with us Dusty?" Pummel mewed, turning his green eyes on his older sister.

Dusty shifted her paws uncertainty. "I don't know, I don't like to leave the place all alone, who will fight off rogues when they try to take it?" Dusty mewed.

"Oh, come on! You worry too much! What idiot is even going to be wandering around without a home this time of the season?" Stretch mewed.

Rainstone bristled and growled. Stretch glanced at her and looked embarrassed. "I-I didn't mean you, Rainstone," he muttered while Pummel swatted him with his tail.

"And that's another thing, I can't leave Rainstone right now, its going to be a while before she's able to hunt on that bad paw of hers, and especially while she's expecting kits," Dusty mewed.

"Oh!" Crystal broke in, squealing like a kit and dashed over to Rainstone. "You're expecting kits?! I can't wait to see them!" Crystal gushed.

Rainstone licked her fur awkwardly. "I'm really looking forward to them," she lied. She didn't know the first thing about being a mother and how to care for her kits and herself! She hadn't even managed one night before needing help.

"Though, actually," she mewed, straightening up and looking at Dusty. "I'm heading out of the mountains. I-I think it'd be safer for me to travel with you guys then all alone," she mewed hesitantly, not wanting to sound like she needed them. *Though you do*, she thought with a twinge of annoyance.

Dusty hesitated then sighed. "If you're going, then you're going to need some help. Fine, we'll all leave tomorrow at dawn," Dusty decided with a small sigh. Though she purred as the three littermates cheered.

Rainstone rested her head on her paws with a small sigh. Things were working out well, and soon she would be out of the mountains

and in a safe place to have her kits.

...

They woke early the next morning, the first pale streaks of light just appearing on the indigo stained sky. The few brightest stars still shone, but the moon had set and the chirping of mountain birds hadn't filled the valley yet. Rainstone spotted a lone figure circling the sky above her. *Eagle*, she thought, they'd have to be careful and watch it.

The snow, like white powdered clouds, lay thickly on the ground, going as high as her legs, in some places even covering her back. She struggled out the first few paw-steps, her odd and awkward limp making her sway and tremble like a kit first learning to walk.

Crystal, Stretch, and Pummel jumped ahead of her, kicking up the soft snow and tumbling around with yowls of delight. Their carefree cheerfulness seemed to warm the frozen air. Rainstone watched them wistfully, she'd been like that just a moon ago. But now she felt older then the mountains.

Dusty fell in by her right side with the frozen-dead paw, ready to catch her if she fell. Rainstone bristled slightly, wanting to snap she could take care of herself. But with the extra weight in her belly and the snow piled around her, she was secretly relived for the help.

Dusty's green gaze never left the invisible trail they padded along. Her green eyes shone with thought and nervousness. Rainstone wondered why Dusty seemed so reluctant to see her mother while the three littermates could hardly contain themselves.

But Rainstone didn't question her, after all, hadn't it been her father that had wanted her dead so badly? She definitely wouldn't want to see him ever again. *Not that I even get a choice*, she thought sadly, looking over her shoulder at the snow-white valley.

Just there, along the tallest mountain ridge, she could see the flash of green that betrayed where the cave was. It was just a tiny speck, three dark spots mingling outside, either going hunting or

patrolling. She swallowed hard, would she be missed? She doubted it, every cat would move on, even Night and Pepper would forget her in time. It'd be just like she'd never existed. Her dreams of being important had vanished on the night when she was discovered.

"Are you coming?" Dusty asked. Rainstone looked ahead to see the dappled brown cat looking at her with impatient eyes. Rainstone had halted in her sad ponderings.

"Y-yeah," Rainstone stuttered, limping heavily up to her. They continued up the mountain ridge that surrounded the valley. The sparse forestland gave way to clear snow, probably there was grass or stone underneath.

Rainstone panted, struggling to keep her footing on the icy snow as the slope grew steeper. Dusty padded beside her, watching her carefully. The three littermates were already at the top, pointing out landmarks with wild flicks of their tails.

Rainstone gasped as she put her dead paw down and it slipped out from under her. Dusty caught her with her shoulder and straightened her up quickly. "Thanks," Rainstone muttered, Dusty nodded in response.

When they reached the top of the slope, Rainstone paused to look back at the valley as Dusty decided to give them a moment to rest after the climb. The valley was full of sparkling white, speckles of brown showed where a few trees were. Her heart ached as she recognized the one with the willow tree where her herbs grew.

She'd never go there again. The rolling hills and blinding snow hid most everything else from view, but Rainstone could just make out the bubbling stream where the water refused to freeze, it shimmered glistening silver in the sunlight. *It guided me here.*

By now the sun was half-way up the sky, climbing steadily higher. And the breeze that blew up from the valley was cold and heavy. But it smelled like home and everything she'd ever known. I'm leaving behind...everything.

The thought was like a rock to her chest, filling her with fear and

anxiety about the unknown, but also a wild sense of daring adventure of finding and trying new things and making her own life all by herself.

Then she looked over the uncrossed land, she'd gazed at it before, but it was still breathtaking. The gentle slopes and hills of the valley ending in narrow passages, sharp peaks, unfriendly gray rock, and white snow blowing like fog over the chasms.

Pummel had already led Crystal and Stretch down, squealing like excited kits on their first time out into the world. Dusty had padded down a few steps, then looked over at her with questioning green eyes.

"Are you ready?" the voice hardly seemed to be Dusty's, instead it mingled with another... An ancient rasp that was smoothed like sand washing over stone.

Rainstone took one last deep breath from her home, breathing in the scents of Whisper, Pepper, Night, and Sun. Then let it out, blowing them away from her like the wind. "Yes, Song, I am ready," she whispered, then started down the slope, feeling her past melt away at her paw-steps like cobwebs in the warm sun.

It is time to begin again.

Chapter 17: Danger in Safety

Chapter 17: Danger in Safety

All day the cats trekked, hampered by Rainstone's slow pace and her rests that kept becoming longer and more frequent. Rainstone felt exhausted, her rounded belly mixing with her new limp made the journey almost intolerable.

At least there's no snow to slip on, she thought, trying to feel optimistic like the three littermates chatting just ahead of her. The hard gray snow was cold bare beneath her paws, Dusty said the snow just blew right off in the relentless up and down drafts that were constantly buffeting their fur.

Sun-high came and went, the last familiar mountain ridge disappeared behind them, unfamiliar and dangerous spiky points and sheer cliffs took its place. The thin, crumbly trail that was pressed against a stone face on one side, and a steep black drop on the other was all Rainstone could concentrate on.

Dusty padded just behind her, keeping one eye on the sky for any preying birds and one on Rainstone, watching her shambling steps with a sharp eye. Rainstone tried to ignore that, as well as the fact that one slip could leave her tumbling over the edge to her doom.

Just focus on one step after another, she told herself, keeping her eyes fixed on the ground right in front of her, her ears pricked for any sound of danger. But she could still feel the drop, watching, waiting, silently willing her to trip right into its waiting depths.

Rainstone fought of her exhaustion with her quiet concentration, releasing a sigh of relief as they at last padded out of the narrow passage and down onto a long-stretched valley filled with snow.

"Just past here is the final slope," Crystal mewed encouragingly. Rainstone looked up at the sky. The weak warmth of the sun had disappeared as the light fell behind the crags in front of them. The

shadows lengthening and the last whispery strands of orange and red lay, fading, on the sky.

Rainstone pushed her exhaustion away, she'd make it past here and to safety tonight. All the cats picked up the pace, trotting smoothly across the large valley, everyone anxious to finish the journey and rest and eat.

But the sun had long left its last mark on the sky, the glittering stars and round moon appearing in the sky. The silver light soothed Rainstone, it almost felt like she was in one of her dreams, no looming mountains around her, just the crystal specked sky and the ground spreading away at her paws, keeping her stuck down to it.

The cats gave a final heave as they padded up over the last ridge, every cat was bone weary and the soft breeze ruffled their whiskers. The soft silver light on the snow gave Rainstone a tired, dreamy feeling. Dusty gave her sharp nudges every once in a while to keep her going, but by the time she'd half slipped and walked down the last, long, steep slope, she could hardly tell what they were in.

She got a hazy vision of an older silver she-cat with white splotches when they stopped, then she was nudged into a den full of warmth and fell asleep almost instantly. Not registering anything but the relief in her paws.

...

Rainstone jerked her head up as something thudded on the ground in front of her. The scent of mouse, muskier and plumper then in the mountains. She nodded a hasty thanks at Stretch as he left, her fur prickling at the reminder she couldn't take care of herself, then wolfed down the food.

She sat, stroking her whiskers clean with her working front paw, leaning sloppily on the other, trying to keep her balance square on it so that it wouldn't roll out.

She saw she was in an earthen den with a tangle of moss and lichen hanging as a curtain over the rock that surrounded the den. Several moss nests and the fresh scents told her this was the den every cat

shared. The way the strong golden light slanted told her it must have been past sun-high.

I hardly ever sleep in so long! Then she reminded herself that she was expecting kits and had been traveling late into the night. She struggled to her paws, her muscles shrieking in protest, but she forced them to bend and strode out, limping even more heavily as she tried to keep her balance on her feeling-less paw.

She blinked in shock at the glare of the yellow light. Snow dotted the ground, only about a mouse-length thick, much less then in the mountains. The air was warmer and more wet, and dripping icicles hung from the trees.

She gaped, even the trees were different! They weren't the gnarled, shrubbery trees she was used to. These were sturdy, strong trees, growing straight and tall, defying the wind and snow. Their bare branches crashed against each other in the wind, roaring back at the gusts.

The ground under-paw was a cool, dark brown dirt, not quite muddy, but not fully dry. Leaf mulch littered the ground, was that what made the ground so soft? The dirt in the mountains had always been hard and dry, except when it rained, then it just washed the top off and left the bottom layer to be bone-hard.

She opened her mouth to take in the scents, they were new, full of different prey scents, different earth scents, and new scents she couldn't place. Then a fresher scent bathed her tongue and she saw Dusty striding from a clump of undergrowth, arriving through a small tunnel of the prickly branches that gave a low circle barrier around the den.

"Enjoy your meal?" Dusty asked, her voice sharp with annoyance.

It took Rainstone a moment to understand that Dusty's annoyance wasn't aimed at her, but something else. "Yes, thank you," Rainstone mewed politely, waiting for Dusty to sulk silently, but surprisingly, that didn't happen.

"My mother's such a mouse-brain!" Dusty hissed angrily, lashing her

tail in frustrated motions.

Rainstone didn't say anything, she didn't know what the rift was, but she was sure it didn't have to do with the younger litter. "I can't believe she keeps judging me by my father, I didn't even know the good-for-nothing crow-food eater," Dusty growled.

Rainstone's ears pricked, *so this has to do with the father that Dusty never knew*. "What happened to him?" she asked quietly.

Dusty shook her head, "Don't know, wasn't there," she muttered bitterly.

"Did your mother tell you anything?" Rainstone pressed, leaning in a little more.

"Other then she never wanted to mate with him, and thus never wanted to have me. Nope!" Dusty snorted with angry resentment.

Rainstone sighed, "May I meet her?" she asked, maybe she could somehow find something out, or at least get a feel for this cat that was so near-sighted to Dusty.

Dusty jerked her muzzle toward the tunnel she'd entered through, "She's just out there with Pummel, Crystal, and Stretch. Can't miss them," Dusty muttered, shaking her head and padding to the den, ducking under the moss and lichen.

Rainstone watched her, worry prickling for her new friend. Shaking her head, she limped for the tunnel, her paw-steps uneven on the hard floor. She suddenly noticed that the snow wasn't just pushed away from the places, it was melting. *The warm season must come on sooner down here*, she thought, sighing.

Once out of the clearing, she pricked her ears. The sounds here were muffled by the trees and undergrowth, not like in the mountains, where the sound floated though the clear air. But she could just make out the laughing voices off to her side.

Following it, the scents, though mingled with the heavy leaf scents, led her to a small clearing where she saw Pummel, Crystal, and Stretch all crowded around the same silver she-cat dappled with

white that she'd half-seen last night.

She flicked her ears worriedly, the older she-cat had the same shade of green eyes that Dusty and Pummel shared, no doubt she was the mother. She wondered if she was interrupting something, but as she watched, she saw the two toms fall into a play-fight over something, Crystal calling out encouragement and the mother looking on with pride in her green eyes.

At first, she'd determined that the mother must have been an overly prideful she-cat who had loved her second litter more then her first kit. But now, she saw something in the she-cat's green eyes that changed the feeling. The dark, haunted, and defeated look that had been so visible in the eyes of the she-cats' back at the cave was in this cat's eyes.

Confident she wouldn't be interrupting anything important now, she limped into the clearing, her tail waving behind her for balance with her new-learned gait. The silver she-cat glanced at her, her green eyes warm and sympathetic, not at all what Rainstone had expected from a cat who didn't like her own daughter.

"How are you doing? You looked almost dead on your paws last night," the silver she-cat's voice was smooth as the river with a vibrating undertone, like a slight tremble in the earth.

"Much better, thank you, I just needed to rest after that difficult journey," Rainstone returned politely, sitting down and leaning off her dead paw.

"I can imagine, going all the way in one day carrying kits, and with a new injury? The trip is difficult enough for a strong cat," the she-cat mewed.

Rainstone nodded, glancing as Crystal argued with Pummel, the fur lifted on the young cat's spines and their eyes glimmered with irritableness. Did all siblings fight? She'd never fought with Pepper, but these cats fought all the time!

She glanced at the silver she-cat, her white patches looked like fallen clouds that had molded onto her pelt, the patches a pale gray

around the edges. "Excuse me, but I never got your name," she mewed.

"Oh, its Flake," the she-cat mewed. *Flake?* At her confused look she carried on. "It used to be Snowflake, but I changed it to be shorter," Flake explained.

Rainstone shrugged, her name wasn't particularly short, but she wasn't going to change it to be shorter anytime soon. She liked her name, it reminded her of her home.

"Anyways, Snowflake sounds like too pretty a name for me," the silver she-cat mewed wistfully. The dark look in her eyes growing stronger.

Rainstone pricked her ears. "Did you live in the mountains before?" she asked slowly.

Flake gave her a sharp glance from her green eyes. "What makes you say that?" her mew edgy.

Rainstone shrugged her dark gray shoulders. "Well, Dusty, Pummel, and Stretch live in the mountains," she pointed out.

Flake gave a curt nod, "Yes, I lived there before I had Dusty. Dusty then decided to move back there last spring, Stretch and Pummel went with her, hardly more then kits!" Flake snorted.

Rainstone twitched her ears, was that why Flake didn't like Dusty? Because Pummel and Stretch left her to go there? "Of course," Flake went on, her eyes softening, "I liked adventure when I was young," she sighed.

So that's not the problem... "What was wrong with Dusty's father? She said he was no good, but never met him," Rainstone went on hesitantly.

Flake's gaze suddenly swam with dark thoughts. "I suppose you may have heard about the cats who live together in a cave in that valley?" Flake growled, too low for the young cats to hear.

Rainstone's heart suddenly thudded in her chest and she nodded,

she knew where this was going. "Well," Flake began, her gaze changing wistful again, "I met a tom on the border one day, a handsome russet cat with green eyes and a ripped tail," Flake mewed slowly.

Rainstone tried to hide her shock, there was only one red tom with green eyes who carried a ripped tail since he was a kit: Fox. She listened to the tale of how Flake met up with this cat three times, on the third time was forced to mate with him, his strength overpowering her own. It was too terrible to relay to kit's ears.

When Flake stopped, she was trembling uncontrollably. "I never saw him again, and I planned to leave his kits for him at the border to take care of, but I kept Dusty, I just couldn't leave her with him, no matter how much I wanted to give back all he forced on me," Flake mewed with a shudder.

Rainstone understood then why she didn't like Dusty, though she thought she could have gotten over it by then. "But that's not Dusty's fault," she pointed out, though she was full of sympathy for Flake.

Flake shook her head, "I know, but I can't help it, I can see him in her, and I don't want to see him in her," Flake mewed, sounding helpless.

Rainstone sighed, well, if that's how she felt, then there was no changing it, what was worse, she couldn't even tell Dusty anything new. Dusty already knew that her mother hadn't wanted her and had been forced into mating with her father.

"That's also why I left the mountains, I didn't want to encounter him again," Flake mewed, her green eyes full of memories.

Rainstone sighed and nodded tiredly. The sun was going now and the littermates had gone hunting. She nodded at Flake, "I'm going to see if I can catch anything, I'll see you later," she mewed, standing up and limping stiffly away.

Its good here, she thought as the dusty light washed over her as she sniffed for prey. *Its warm and safe here, no danger at all, not like the*

mountains...

...

Rainstone managed to just barely catch a mouse before dark, and then ate it and fell asleep instantly, tired after her struggle in hunting. But she slept restlessly, warmth and cold flashing in waves through her. Icy cold fear of something she could sense keeping her from sleeping.

She finally gave up and, getting up, she crept over the other sleeping cats and stood in the moon bathed clearing. Soft grass whispered in the breeze and the trees hit each other with boney creaks. The moon was veiled by thin clouds, the wet breeze and rings around the moon promised rain.

She shivered, without the sun, the air was cold, though it lacked the nip in the mountains. Her thick fur glowed lightly in the dim moonlight, the blue edge more evident then ever. She sat, feeling the smooth grass beneath her paws and let the wind whistle through her ears, calming her and allowing her to be aware of her exhaustion.

But something stopped her from going back into the den. A fresh scent, she'd smelled it earlier, and Pummel had told her to avoid it. What was it? Not quite cat, but a meat-eater no doubt. It reminded her a bit of the wolf smell she occasionally found in the mountains.

She stiffened as she heard a low, threatening growl. Rising to her paws with her fur bushed out with wary fear, she stared as two russet figures leaped over the low bramble barrier.

They were taller then a cat with lengthier bodies, thick, bushy tails and an ugly narrow snout speckled with scars and whiskers. Their eyes were dark and beady, with the sharp, pointed look of a hawk. A bit of brown mixed with russet on one was the only thing that set the two apart.

Rainstone instinctively knew these were dangerous, though she'd never seen them in the mountains. She let out a call of alarm to the sleeping cats while the creatures circled her. She saw a flash of

white at the curtain and a horrified gasp.

Rainstone didn't turn to see who it was, too busy keeping herself facing the creatures who were trying to weave around her to spring at her exposed back. Fear erupted in her, she'd too easily assumed the place was safe, not even asking about what dangers may lay in wait. Not every danger came from other cats.

"Get out mange-pelts!" the vicious and defiant snarl came from an all too familiar voice. Dusty was at her side, her dusky pelt glowed in the moonlight. But the silver light also lit up her bared fangs and her ivory claws. She was going to fight.

Dusty glanced at her sideways. "Get out with every other cat, I'll keep them distracted," the she-cat muttered through her bared fangs.

Shock and fear flashed through Rainstone and she started. "But what about you?!" she protested, keeping one eye on the enemy that looked like it was preparing the strike.

"There's a tunnel in the den, follow it out, I'll get away and climb a tree, I'll be fine," Dusty continued, as if Rainstone hadn't spoken.

The mountain cat still didn't move, how could she leave her friend to fight alone? "Think of your kits!" Dusty hissed when Rainstone didn't move.

Rainstone didn't want to think of her kits, that those creatures that she'd used purely to survive could cost Dusty her life. But her paws carried her back into the den and then Flake was pushing her through the dark, tripping her over nests and down into a close area that smelled heavily of dirt and pressed around all sides of her.

She crawled forward, feeling Flake nudging her from behind for what seemed like forever, but was probably only a few heartbeats. Then she emerged into the cool forest air again.

Instantly the stench of the predators touched the roof of her mouth and she let out a whimper of distress. In front of her stood Pummel, Stretch, and Crystal in a defensive line, facing with hackles raised

another one of those creatures.

Suddenly, a loud yowling arose through the quiet night air and in burst another creature, the one with brown in its fur that she'd seen in the front of the den. *It must have broken past Dusty to help its friend!*

She watched as the two creatures raced forward in unison. The three littermates leapt at one, taking it down under a withering mass of fur. But leaving Rainstone fully exposed to the other, as Flake had yet to emerge behind her.

Recalling all her fights with Pepper, she balanced on her toes and dodged around the snapping jaws, raking a paw down its hind leg with sharp precision. But her kits had made her heavy and unbalanced, so as the creature whipped around she slipped and it buried its teeth into her shoulder.

She let out a howl of pain and lashed out with her hind legs, kicking the sharp muzzle away. But now she lay exposed on her back, the creature pressed its giant paw into her belly, heavy with kits. She shrieked, not from pain, but from fear of what was happening to her precious kits.

Then the creature was off of her and she was struggling to keep her panic contained. She looked to see Flake wrestling with the creature. She clung on to its back with claws buried in its fur and her teeth locked in an ear.

Rainstone stared around and saw the three littermates nipping at the retreating paws of the last creature. They weren't uninjured, Pummel's white and gray fur was splattered with blood and a nasty cut sliced down Stretch's flank, while one of Crystal's shiny eyes was swollen shut.

A yowl interrupted her assessment. Looking around, she saw Flake thrown off the creature's back and from the shadows appeared the third creature, it was injured, but no cat pursued it. Fear almost turned her vision black for a moment.

"Dusty!" she shrieked. Her cry did nothing but focus the arriving

creature's focus on her. It charged for her and she raced at it, her fear fighting with fury and hardly even feeling her limp.

She leapt, swiping at its ear and flank with swipes that spattered her muzzle with blood as she skimmed past. But then she soon found herself cornered by two of the russet creatures against the mound of the back of the den. Their yips and barks echoing off her ears like eerie cries.

Then she felt claws drag at her pelt and her paws were swung from the ground before she landed with a stumble on her dead paw. She looked up and felt a joy of delight to see Dusty's green eyes.

Then it fell away as she realized she was actually looking at Pummel. "Quick!" the young tom barked. "Crystal, take her! Meet up with us within four days at the usual place," Pummel's words were lost on Rainstone's confused ears.

But she felt a soft nose nudging her gently but persistently. She took up a run, the soft flank at her side guiding her around fallen branches and washed-out holes. She was aware of nothing but the pain in her belly and the ache in her leg of her dead paw. Then she gradually became aware of something else.

The hot breath at her paws had disappeared and the moonlight had grown stronger. Stumbling to a stop, she looked around. The forest had disappeared, instead she stood in an area of flat, waving, brown grass. No snow under-paw.

Where am I? Looking back, she saw where they had left, a large, round patch of dark haze that rose abruptly from the flat ground. The mountains stood off to her left, a dark blotch against the sky. She looked around and her eyes rested on Crystal, the white and black she-cat looked utterly exhausted and was staring at her wearily from a few paces ahead.

The stunned look frozen on her face reminded Rainstone of what just happened and she laid down, slowing her breathing and trying to remember. *What happened to Dusty? And Stretch? And Flake? Are they okay? Where are they now? An-and what were those creatures?*

She realized her breathing had grown fast, though warmth filled her as Crystal curled down by her, her soft, faint breathing warm on her flank. She was so innocent, so young... The forest had seemed so as well.

There's a danger in safety, you forget to look for trouble.

Chapter 18: Home?

Chapter 18: Home?

The sun shone half-way up the sky, a pale glow with clouds wreathed around it and the bare yellow-brown landscape was specked by two lone dots of color. Rainstone was ready to get moving, Crystal was less so. "We have to wait four days or we could be in trouble," Crystal protested, while Rainstone paced back and forth.

"In trouble from what?" she snapped irritably.

"I said we'd wait four days, if we're early or late we could end up jeopardizing everything," Crystal growled. The usually friendly cat was getting snappy.

"Why can't we go back to the forest?" Rainstone pressed, feeling confused and worried. The thought of what happened to every other cat put her belly in a twist, not to mention her own paws and belly ached from her injuries.

"Those foxes will still be hanging around, we've had trouble from them in the past, we'll meet up with the other cats in a different place," Crystal mewed firmly, her gaze hard.

Rainstone's ears flicked up, "Foxes? that's what those were?" she asked, picturing Fox the cat as those savage creatures, it wasn't difficult. "But what about Dusty? Was she there when we split up?" Rainstone asked.

Crystal's eyes darkened, "No cat saw her, but I'd have a hard time believing she's dead. Dusty can take care of herself," Crystal mewed, though she looked uncertain.

"And the other cats?" Rainstone asked, not knowing what she meant about this 'different' place.

"Pummel and Stretch went with Flake, they're hiding out some place," Crystal mewed.

Rainstone shook her head, "Why did we split up?" she demanded, sitting down since her paws ached.

"To shake off the foxes, they could only chase one of us and its easier to lose one then two," Crystal explained. Rainstone snorted. "Oh, come on! It'll all be okay, those foxes were just passing through, they'll be gone by the time we meet and go home," Crystal purred, sounding like she was trying to convince herself.

"So, where is this meeting place?" Rainstone mewed finally, her mind a whirl of fear and anxiety.

"Do you see that bit of brush over there?" Crystal mewed, pointing toward the west. Rainstone peered through the hazy distance and saw a speck of brown on the open plain. "There's a forest over there, larger then the one we call home, and there is a little waterfall that we have as a meeting place in case anything goes wrong," Crystal mewed.

"Why there?" Rainstone asked.

"That's where I was born with my littermates and where my dad lived, mom moved closer to the mountains when Stretch and Pummel went with Dusty into the mountains," Crystal mewed, her eyes wistful.

Rainstone broke off her nervous tail-twitching. "Do you miss your father?" she asked softly.

Crystal snapped her gaze back to her, surprise clear on her glistening blue eyes. "Of course! Don't you?" Crystal mewed, as if she couldn't imagine a cat not liking their dad.

Rainstone didn't respond, thinking of Hawk for a heartbeat. *He wanted me dead, didn't care, just cared about me not causing trouble*. Sadness and anger throbbed in three paws, her dead paw still lifeless.

Rainstone shook out her fur, a breeze rustled the top of the long

grass that grew as tall as her shoulder. The sun was hiding behind gray clouds and the promised rain seemed to be getting closer.

"You said four days?" Rainstone mewed thoughtfully, eyeing the forest patch they had left.

Crystal nodded. Rainstone turned to her with a smirk on her face. "Then we are going to go back and search for Dusty," she declared.

"What?!" Crystal exclaimed, jumping to her paws, her long white fur bristling.

"Yep!" Rainstone purred, relishing Crystal's bewilderment.

"Why?" Crystal mewed.

Rainstone felt a surge of fury, "Because she's my friend and your sister!" she burst out, plucking at the ground with her claws in frustration.

"Half-sister," Crystal muttered.

"Really? Whatever, I'm going, you can come with me or not," Rainstone mewed casually, slightly annoyed by Crystal's remark. She started to retrace her steps from the night before. *I can reach the forest by night and see if Dusty's around, then take two days getting to the meeting place, and if I don't... well, its not my family.*

She halted as a flash of white blocked her path. She glared at Crystal. Crystal looked back, eyes annoyed, "Okay, you can go, but I'm coming with you," Crystal mewed through clenched teeth.

Rainstone purred gently and touched Crystal's shoulder, She suddenly realized Crystal was about her age, she'd always felt that the littermates were younger then her, but they were all about the same age, about twelve-thirteen moons.

I just feel older since I'm having kits... The thought weighed heavy on her mind as she and Crystal trekked in silence as the sun rose on one side and fell on the other. As they neared the forest, the haze took shape into trees just starting to bud and bracken just starting to unfurl.

Rain started falling with dusk, plunging the two weary travelers into a cold and unfriendly world. The trees offered little cover from the downpour that shone dusty and brown in the fleeting light of dusk below the clouds.

Rainstone sniffed warily, her eyes open and ears flicked up for the scent of the foxes. Crystal padded by her side, her white fur looked grey in the rain and her spotted fur was plastered to her sides, her whiskers dripping with raindrops that swelled and splashed off.

Crystal's blue eyes shone wide and glassy in the rain, her muzzle lifted high so that her breath ruffled Rainstone's ear when she jerked her head around. Her tail twitched restlessly, flicking Rainstone with more rain, not that she cared, Rainstone was looking for any signs of Dusty as they neared the den.

Crystal hissed suddenly and nudged her off the trail, slipping and sliding into a dripping wet gorse bush who's thorns pulled at her pelt. Rainstone opened her jaws to snap at the she-cat, now she had thorns and muddy leaves in her fur!

But Crystal's dripping wet tail pressed against her mouth and Rainstone was tempted to bite it off. If not for the scent that drifted to her and the sound of thumping paws, large paws, against the sopping earth.

She spied through Crystal's bushed out fur a flicker of russet tail tipped with white. The low barks sparked fury and fear in her as she imagined those creatures strutting around the forest as if it was all theirs.

But the fox passed without noticing them, probably thanks to the rain that muted all scents. Rainstone twitched rain off her ears and nudged her way out, sticking her nose out to sniff and get a good look around against Crystal's warning cry.

"Its gone," Rainstone mewed quietly, not exactly sure how far gone.

"But we know its still here with its friends, we should leave before we get trapped," Crystal mewed nervously.

But Rainstone was padding to an oak tree, its tough bark glistened with rain. Shuffling her nervousness away, she reached up and gripped the bark with her claws and slowly hauled herself up, her back paws aching to get a grip while her limp front paw did nothing but hold on by force on every lucky paw-hold she got.

Her added weight made the going slow and Crystal had scampered up before she reached the first branch. "See?" Rainstone puffed, waving her trembling tail toward all the trees. "We'll just travel by tree," she panted as she struggled to stay balanced on the slippery wood.

Crystal eyed her with concern but nodded. "Okay, but we have to be gone by morning," the she-cat mewed firmly.

Rainstone swished her tail mutinously, she wasn't going to leave her friend if she was here! "Dusty may be making her way over to the safe place," Crystal pointed out. "And Pummel asked me to take care of you, that's what I'm going to do," Crystal mewed stubbornly, her young shoulders held her up regally even though her sodden form downgraded the effect.

Rainstone carefully placed her paws on the branch, the rain pelting down from above and its icy chill seeped down to her bones. Her claws dug into the wood as a breeze sent her branch bouncing and rain lashed her face. This is impossible! she thought, she'd fall before she made her way anywhere!

Crystal, on the other paw, scampered like a squirrel, tail bushed out behind her, along the branches. Rainstone guessed she was lucky that she'd gotten used to her limp and that the branches interlocked, making her crossing from one tree to another easy.

That is, until they came to the gap around the den. Crystal bounded back in front of her, balancing easily on the thin branch while Rainstone strained to keep herself on. "I don't see her, I think we should go," Crystal mewed, her blue eyes worried and glistening like the rain.

Rainstone nodded slowly, her eyes tracing her route to the den. As Crystal turned around with a sigh of relief, Rainstone leapt down to

the ground, a huff of shock as her paws hit something that didn't bounce. It feels so good! Keeping low, she trotted through the entrance to the den, keeping her mouth wide to taste the scents.

My scent, Pummel's, Crystal's... Flake's and Stretch's as well, all aged the same... but Dusty's is slightly fresher... and tinged with blood. She mused carefully double-tasting to make sure, she must have come back and seen we were gone...

"I thought we were leaving! Crystal's hiss made her jump.

"Crystal! Dusty came back after we left!" Rainstone mewed, remembering just in time to keep her voice low.

"Really?" Crystal's eyes were wide and her look of fear and anger changed to a look of surprise. *She never thought we'd find anything!* Rainstone thought indignantly.

Crystal tasted the air, looking back at her in confusion, "I can't tell if its fresher or not," Crystal mewed.

Rainstone twitched her tail in annoyance, "Its there, and it leads out... here," Rainstone followed the scent out, taking the route back through the tunnel and immediately veering off the track to a small bunny trail that led, twisting, through the trees. Crystal followed with anxious steps and a bushed tail.

Eventually, Crystal's nose twitched and she looked at Rainstone in surprise. "Believe me now?" Rainstone growled, knowing she had picked up the undeniable scent.

"But how did you scent it earlier? In all this rain?" Crystal asked, looking impressed.

Rainstone shrugged, "I don't know how you didn't," she muttered, picking the pace up as the scent grew steadily stronger. Dusty must have come along here after sun-high. Breaking into a run, Rainstone sprinted through the soaking forest, the rain easing up a bit and the faint shine of moonlight lit up the forest's silhouettes.

The scent of fox faded and Dusty's scent grew stronger. But

Rainstone's heart leapt in her throat at every whiff, because along with Dusty's scent came the heavy stench of blood. She imaged her friend horribly wounded and bleeding to death and speed rushed to her paws as she raced faster then a shadow, not even noticing her limp or the cold rain washing over her pelt.

She skidded to an abrupt halt at the edge of the forest on the south side. A trial of blood washed down with the rain from a small rise just in front of her that was carpeted with heather and a bunch of tall gorse stood as a lone den on the top of the rise.

Breath coming in rapid gasps, Rainstone padded, stock-stiff, to the gorse den. The scent of blood almost hiding her friend's scent. In the dark, Rainstone could only sense a lump of fur, and she was glad that Crystal had stayed out.

Rainstone sniffed over her friend, her heart wrenching as she found several long slashes still dripping with blood and a nasty bite to her ear and back leg. "Oh! Dusty..." Rainstone breathed as she sniffed the sour scent of infection and heard the labored breathing.

The cat stirred, "Rainstone?" Dusty's voice was confused and half-gone, it wrenched Rainstone's heart.

Stop it! Focus on helping her instead of feeling guilty that while you ran to safety you left her to drag herself to the edge of the territory.... Stop it! Focusing fiercely on grabbing the moss on the ground and pressing it against Dusty's wounds she called to Crystal.

"What? Oh!" Crystal gasped.

"Find cobwebs, marigold, horsetail, or goldenrod, I also need bindweed and some nettle," Rainstone shot off the list of herbs.

She glanced at Crystal when she saw the she-cat wasn't moving. "What are those things?" Crystal asked, Rainstone hissed quietly in exasperation. *That's right, she's not from where I live, she doesn't know anything about herbs!*

"Get the cobwebs then!" Rainstone snapped and Crystal dashed off. Rainstone hurriedly rolled Dusty into a patch of faint light so she

could see more clearly. Trying to keep her trembling paws still, she grabbed some moss and held it out of the den for a few moments, allowing it to be wetted by the rain and then started gently cleaning Dusty's wounds.

With the matted blood and fur clean, Rainstone's fur prickled to see how deep they were. *And she has a broken rib as well*, Rainstone felt it as she ran her paw along the slender ribs. She sighed in relief as Crystal came back, hopping on three legs with one paw swaddled with cobwebs and more stuck to her chest and muzzle.

Rainstone snatched the ones from Crystal's forepaw as the white she-cat reached the swab the rest from her fur. Rainstone carefully bound all the wounds with cobwebs, but the sour scent of infection hung heavy in the damp air.

Dawn came around, shining light on the three cats. Dusty had fallen into an unconscious doze and Rainstone worked with numb paws to try to keep her nose damp and cobwebs in place, it was slow going with only one front paw. Crystal left and returned with three mice, holding them by their tails and dropping them on a dry patch of moss that lay on the muddy floor of the washed-out den.

"I need those herbs," Rainstone hissed under her breath to Crystal.

"Even if I did know what they were, its just barely spring! There won't be any herbs to pick!" Crystal hissed back, her eyes round with anguish and helplessness. Rainstone felt the same, the cobwebs would stop the bleeding, but the infection was deep and with no herbs to fight it...

I can't think about that! I need to keep the wounds clean to prevent the infection from spreading, she told herself firmly. Her belly rumbled and she glanced at the mice, Crystal nudged one to her and dug into her own, devouring it in a few bites.

Rainstone hesitated, not wanting to eat as long as Dusty couldn't. But she was extra hungry with more mouths to feed and gave in to her hunger and gulped it down. Cleaning the last scraps from her whiskers, she suddenly saw how drafty the den was and how the light drizzle seeped in through the gorse roof.

"We need to fix this den, if Dusty has any hope, she needs to be warm and clean," Rainstone mewed.

Crystal nodded and they set to work immediately. They laid dry heather over the muddy floor and scraped out the biggest piles of muddy leaves and twigs, using the rest to patch the holes in the roof. Then they wove waxy leaves and heather into the gorse to thicken the walls and made the opening just a narrow passage instead of an open wall.

Rainstone kept checking Dusty, listening to the heavy breathing and sniffing at her sour breath. She worked tirelessly on the den, even though she hadn't slept since running out of the forest. By sun-high they had dried out the den and filled the holes. The rain had stopped, though fitful gray clouds continued rolling overhead with a few spurts of sprinkling rain.

Rainstone yawned, exhausted. After fixing the den, she'd gone out and searched for herbs in the area. All she'd found was a bunch of blackened horsetail. *There's no herbs, I can just hope Dusty will be able to fight it off.*

Laying down by her friend, she pressed against Dusty. But she couldn't sleep, her pelt felt fur of fleas and the smell of damp fur and mud made her feel icky and dirty. Sitting up with a sigh, she tiredly groomed her dark gray fur, feeling the fur smooth under her long swipes of her tongue.

Finally, when she felt clean, she settled down to sleep, feeling Dusty's uneven breaths on her ears and felt her slowing heartbeat against her flank.

She remembered the old kit-tale that if you wish for something three times over, it'd come true. Closing her eyes, she began as she drifted off to sleep. *Please be okay, Please be okay... She fell asleep.*

...

Rainstone woke to a cold nose nudging her shoulder. She blinked tiredly and saw fiery red light flooding the ground outside the den and a silhouette standing in front of her.

"Crystal? What's wrong?" Rainstone asked, eyeing Crystal's grief-stricken face.

"I-its Dusty, she isn't breathing," Crystal mewed in a pained and horrified voice.

Rainstone's fur lifted along her spine as she realized she didn't hear Dusty's breath anymore and her body was cold as stone besides her. She turned and nudged Dusty, the golden dappled she-cat didn't twitch.

"Dusty? Oh, Dusty, wake up!" Rainstone begged, but she scented the terrible stench of death. She placed her ear to Dusty's chest. Silence. No heartbeat.

"Because of her loss of blood she couldn't fight off the infection," Rainstone mumbled, stumbling and feeling as if her head was heavier then the mountains.

"B-But, how can she be gone?" Crystal wailed, her white fur still matted with mud.

Rainstone stared at her, not sure how to comfort her when she was feeling so sad. "I don't know," she felt her eyes glisten, "I just don't know," she mumbled again. She closed her eyes and remembered the last time she'd seen her, facing the foxes to give every cat a chance of safety.

And we left her to die! Grief and guilt wrenched at her heart as she remembered running away with Crystal at her side. Her wounds still stung on her belly, she hadn't even bothered to clean them and she could tell infection would set in if she didn't do anything about it soon.

She looked at Crystal, trying to figure out what they had to do next. "We need to bury Dusty, then go meet up with every other cat," she mewed finally, her words sounding hollow as she struggled to get to her paws and move on.

Crystal pressed to her side, shivering uncontrollably and her eyes were blank as they dug a hole in the soft earth at the edge of the

forest. The moon was rising as they dragged Dusty into the hole, Rainstone felt sick as they tumbled earth over her friend.

What is she's really alive? Are we killing her now by burying her? Worry pricked at her paws, but she knew that Dusty was really dead, the feared smell was unmistakable.

She sat with Crystal, staring blankly at the patch of freshly turned earth. Her mind was numb, she couldn't think as she felt the chilly breeze and the silver moonlight wash over her pelt.

Rainstone felt a breath on her ear. Confused, since Crystal sat on her other side, she turned her head and saw two shimmering outlines. One was a black cat with amber eyes, the familiar scent cleared Rainstone's grief.

But then the other shape stepped out of the shadows, a dark brown she-cat with a long, winding tail and dusted golden dapples framing a pair of green eyes. *Dusty? Oh! Song, please take care of Dusty!* she silently begged. Song gave a small, slow nod and then they disappeared into the shadow.

...

"Come on! We need to go meet the other cats," Rainstone pushed Crystal.

The she-cat stumbled as they left the forest behind and struck out over the bare plains. Crystal seemed to catch unto Rainstone's urgency and they picked up to a trot. By sun-high they'd left the forest in the distance and Crystal seemed to have shed some of her grief.

"I can't wait to get there! Its so pretty, you'll see," Crystal purred.

Rainstone nodded, struggling to shake out the cold bit of grief in her belly. After seeing Dusty and Song she felt better, but it didn't help the fact that she missed Dusty's company. *We were just barely friends.... And now I'll never know her better*, she thought with regret.

"And in half a moon we'll be able to return to the forest and go home," Crystal's words broke her out of her thoughts.

Home? Rainstone's thoughts echoed the word. She looked back at the dark haze. The branches pointed unfriendly and they clashed against each other in conflict. Somewhere there Dusty's body was laid under the dirt with grass and flowers growing.

That's not my home, and neither are the mountains, she thought, glancing at the sheer rocks. *I don't have a home... but I'll keep looking until I find one.*

Chapter 19: Alone

Chapter 19: Alone

The clouds were white and fluffy like sheep fur, the sky a robin egg blue background. Rainstone snorted as a bit of sheep fur stuck onto her nose. She glared at the wholly creatures, their plaintive baas filled their ear while their stench made Rainstone retch.

She looked ahead, the dark haze she and Crystal had been padding after for the past two days had grown close enough that Rainstone could see the individual branches of the bare trees and the green haze over the forest floor as grass shot up from the dark soil and ferns released new leaves.

The air had steadily grown warmer as they'd headed south-west, following the sun's descent at an angle. "So, where is this waterfall of yours?" Rainstone asked, shaking a bit of dirt from her limp paw.

"Just at the very edge, the other cats should be there waiting," Crystal mewed, her voice lacking the happy bounce it'd had when they'd first met. They were both grieving for Dusty.

Rainstone couldn't shake off a sense of guilt that if she hadn't run away from the foxes, she would have been able to help Dusty before the infection had taken hold of her. But the fresh air blowing and the red strains of dusk streaking out far across the sky along with strands of gold and vibrant orange, life went on.

They left the field of sheep behind and entered the forest. Rainstone gazed around with a frown, she didn't like forests anymore. Not that she liked them much to begin with, but she hated them even more now that she knew they harbored savage creatures such as foxes that could kill without remorse.

The shadows deepened and darkened as Rainstone heard the relentless splashing that she remembered from back in the cave. She was brought back to standing by the small stream dropping and

bubbling along a rock current down the dusty slope.

Rainstone eyed the glimmering sunlight through the trees, it seemed dusty and old, not like when it rose as a ball of shining glory in the morning. But the earth was cool and the scents were fresh as the warm season came on with new life.

Crystal led her along a faint trail, the ground cool to the touch and the soft tickling of grass rubbed away the raw soreness in her paws. She could smell the other cats up ahead, the absence of Dusty's familiar scent pulled at her heart and she and Crystal both slowed as the ground sloped down.

But Crystal rounded the bend without hesitating and let out a joyful yowl as Flake, Pummel, and Stretch nuzzled her. Rainstone stayed a step back, looking on wistfully. *My family wouldn't welcome me back like that... They'd kill me.*

Wryness pulled at her muzzle and she had to stop herself from scowling. After a few moments, in which the sun completely hid itself from view, the cats broke away from their tight bundle and started questioning each other loudly.

Rainstone studied the surroundings as they caught each other up. The small waterfall, only about six fox-lengths tall, was made of rocks that sat on top of each other in perfect harmony. Their were plenty of paw holds to climb it. Around her, the earth rose up to meet the top of the waterfall.

Stretching her muzzle up, she saw the ground above the rise was flat, meaning they sat in a hollow. The grass was bare and brown, turning a soft green with new growth. The waterfall had a little pool that it splashed into. Rainstone wondered if the whole hollow had once been filled with water, and that if a tiny underground tunnel had carried the excess water elsewhere.

She padded to the pool, the ground turned to mud, it felt cold and molded her paw-prints into the ground, but her paws came off clean as she stepped back with water dripping from her whiskers.

"But Dusty hasn't come yet, she might still be back at home," the

words Rainstone hadn't wanted to hear had been spoken by Flake. She turned to Flake, would she be happy her daughter was gone? Or would she grieve?

Rainstone met Crystal's eyes, they had darkened and her face looked strained. She opened her mouth, no doubted to tell her family the bad news, but Rainstone beat her to it. "Dusty is dead," she mewed, her voice soft like the breeze.

Every cat stared at her; the lop-sided, kit-expecting, strange mountain cat who was running from her past. Pummel's and Stretch's eyes widened with shock and a whimper came from the toms' throats. Flake stared at her, sorrow in her green eyes, but also a light of guilty relief.

She hates herself that she is glad, but she is. Rainstone couldn't look at her. "H-how do you know?" Pummel cried, his green eyes that matched Dusty's were wet.

"We went back to the forest and found her injured, but there were no herbs to use and it was too late to help her," Rainstone whispered, dropping her head. The cats sat in silence for a few moments, no doubt reliving moments in their lives when Dusty had been with them.

"I wish we'd never dragged her away from the mountains, now she'll never see her home again!" Stretch cried out at last, his eyes burning with guilt.

"Oh, dears," Flake whispered, resting her tail across Stretch's shoulders. "Dusty wanted us all to be safe, that's why she gave her life for us. The best thing we can do to protect her memory is live on as she wanted," Flake murmured, so gentle that Rainstone longed to believe them. But she didn't believe that Dusty could have possible wanted to die for a mother who hated her and a strange cat who had burdened her.

Rainstone looked away, sitting down with a sigh. She looked over her shoulder to see Flake and Crystal pressed against Pummel and Stretch. Rainstone sat all alone by the waterfall as the moon rose and sparkled its silver light on her fur and the water. She expected

no cat to comfort her and no cat did all that night.

The morning came, the four other cats had fallen asleep, but Rainstone had stayed sitting, still as stone. She had thought of her kits in her belly, how they'd become so much less active after the attack from the foxes, as if there was less life in them as there was less life in her.

She tried to count up how long it'd be before she kitted. Judging from how big her belly had gotten and how long it'd been expecting, she'd say it was no longer then half-a-moon. *So I need to find somewhere safe and secluded...*

The other cats were just waking up, the cheerfulness forced on every cat's faces. "We can hunt, then head back, the foxes should be gone by now," Flake mewed briskly.

Rainstone didn't move as the other cats rushed off to hunt. Instead, she groomed her fur and padded to the pool, dabbling her paw in the water. She remembered when she and Night had gone on their final assessment, when they'd stopped by a pool on their first day, she'd liked dabbing her paws in and watching the ripples. She felt the same now, except the sun wasn't warm and the scents were so changed.

She felt wistfulness cover her, remembering how simple things had once been, even if it had been dangerous and scary, she'd always known what she had to do. Now she wasn't sure what she'd do.

"Here Rainstone, you must be exhausted, and hunting while expecting kits isn't easy," the warm mew of Flake and the scent of shrew jerked Rainstone from her nostalgia.

Rainstone nodded awkwardly, she hadn't even tried to hunt. But Flake had a finch for herself and they ate their prey in silence. "Do you need more? You'll need your strength as we travel back," Flake mewed.

Rainstone swallowed the last mouthful of the shrew, shifting her paws uncomfortably. She'd made a decision, one that needed to be shared. "Actually... I-err- I won't be going back with you," Rainstone

mewed.

Flake looked at her in shock. "But what are you going to do then? You'll need help when you kit, and it isn't safe to be all alone in hostile territory," Flake mewed.

Rainstone's fur bristled with excitement. *Alone!* what a wonderful word! It sounded exciting, taking on the rural world single-pawed! She was ready, really ready, not like when she'd first left the cave with doubt and fear tugging at her paws even though the other choice was certain death. She wanted to see the world, trek through the forests and plain by herself, never stopping in one place that never changed for too long.

She twitched her ears, that wouldn't happen. Not for very long anyways. She'd have her kits and they'd travel with her, not that the idea was much less exciting. *Will they be she-cats or toms? Or both?* Curiosity washed over her, one she'd never had before. She really wanted these kits, wanted to know them, help them, live with them, teach them.

She met Flake's worried gaze with shining eyes. "I will have my kits, they'll keep me going," she promised. She could feel them moving in her belly, as if as excited as she was.

Flake hesitated, "If that is your wish, but I must warn you, not too far away from here, toward the west, there are four large groups of cats that will chase you away or kill you, I'd stay away from them," Flake mewed.

Rainstone's fur prickled, thinking of more cats that lived like the cats in the cave. She wouldn't go anywhere near them if she could help it. But nonetheless, curiosity pricked her, maybe she'd go see them one day just to see for herself...

Turning her gaze opposite of the sun that was rising over the mountains behind her, she looked deep into the forest, unknown terrain just waiting for her to pad upon. She couldn't wait to be alone.

...

Rainstone waved her tail in farewell as the four cats padded out of the hollow. Pummel looked upset, Stretch looked confused, Crystal looked regretful, but Flake's gaze was clear and her eyes warm with acceptance. *Dusty would have been the same*, she thought with a flicker of grief.

After announcing her departure from the group, there'd been a lot of arguing and goodbye's, she hadn't realized she felt so close to the family after only a short time spent with them. *Tragedy can untie us all in grief*, she thought.

Once the cats had left, Rainstone stretched, all alone in the forest, she felt more relaxed. No cats to tell her what to do or where to be, she could go wherever she wanted. Sniffing the air, she decided to climb around the top of the waterfall.

She climbed by means of the slope instead of the unstable rocks. At the top, she saw the stream, hardly more then two tail-lengths wide. She could tell by the fast moving current and her inability to see the bottom of the stream, that it was deep.

She followed the stream west. All was quiet, the chirping of birds and chattering of squirrels was low and distant as the sun rose behind her. Rainstone kept careful alert for the scent of fox, but she passed through the forest without encountering danger.

Around sun-high, the stream expanded, becoming wider, but less deep. She could see the pebbly streambed and the flicker of scaly creatures swimming with the current. Fish? she thought with excitement, she'd always wanted to try fish, but no cat had ever caught any back at the cave. It was too dangerous to get wet paws in the mountains.

Gradually, even the forest changed, becoming more green and the undergrowth more thick. The brown dappled ground covered with decaying leaves from the oaks around her. The ground was soft and firm, making it easy for her to limp over.

She felt content, nothing but warm sun on her back, cool breeze in her whiskers, and lazy thoughts about the scenery. But her grumbling belly and aching paws stopped that for awhile. She

padded on a bit more, looking for a nice place to rest for the day.

She found a sunlit rise with a maple tree in full bud perched upon it, the river running right past. Rainstone nodded to herself and quickly tracked down a mouse. It was easy in the prey-filled woods. She settled herself down under the maple tree and in full light of the warm sun.

It made her drowsy, her belly full, the sun warm, the ground soft, and the endless murmur of the stream filling her ears with its steady rhythm. Her tail flicked in its rhythm and she kept her eyes fixed lazily on the gleaming bubbles as the stream rushed past. *I never had this leisure time in the cave.*

Her gray fur soaked up the heat and she let herself drift into sleep. *If this is what being alone is like, I can get used to it.*

The thought had barely crossed her mind when she heard a screech and the wild flapping of wings. Instinctively, from living in the mountains where every cat was conscious of eagle attacks, she pulled herself up and swatted upward. Her paws hit something and her claws sliced her attacker.

She stood in shock as a big, round, bird flew away with a hooting cry. "Wow! I've never seen a cat react so quickly!" a voice spoke behind her.

She looked over her shoulder to see a scrawny, tawny furred tom sitting in the shadows, his yellow eyes wide and impressed. "Ah... thanks," she mewed, slightly embarrassed she'd let her senses down and allowed both a bird and a cat to creep up on her.

"What are you doing here? I've never seen you before," the tom continued, padding forward.

"I'm passing through," Rainstone mewed curtly.

"While expecting kits?" the tom snorted in disbelief.

"What? I'm fine all by myself!" Rainstone defended herself hotly.

"I've no doubt, after batting away that owl as if it was a moss-ball,

but I don't think you chose to travel around, you were forced to do it, right?" the tom pressed, padding closer so that he stood just at the bottom of the little hill she stood on.

"So what if I was?" she growled.

"Oh, nothing, I was just wondering since the last cat I saw traveling alone sounded a lot like you," the tom mewed.

"Sounded?" Rainstone mewed in confusion.

"Yeah, the same accent," the tom mewed. Rainstone blinked in confusion, suddenly realizing that his mew was bright and clear, while her own sounded edged and lilted, like water. She also remembered that the cats she'd stayed with had been half-way between her mew and this tom's mew.

"What did the cat look like?" Rainstone asked, there was only one cave cat she knew who may have been traveling through here.

"It was a patchy brown tabby, said he used to live near the mountains, but left after he was attacked by some cats, it was last summer and I know for a fact that the tom went to live with Twolegs," the strange cat mewed.

"Oh," Rainstone mewed, she'd wanted to know if it'd been Scamp. But it obviously wasn't. "What are Twolegs?" she asked curiously.

The tom glanced at her in surprise, "Big, pink creatures who live in forests of rock and have a tiny bit of hair on their heads. Oh, and they walk on only two legs," the tom explained.

Rainstone crinkled her nose, "They sound weird," she mewed.

"You've never seen one?" the tom asked, looking even more stunned and slightly amused.

Rainstone shook her head.

"Well, if you're traveling, you'll run into them eventually, there are few places where you can't find twolegs," the tom laughed.

Rainstone sat down, curling her tail over her paws. "Excuse me, but I never got your name," she mewed.

"Oh, I don't really have a name anymore, no cat around here to call me by it. But I was once named Hopper, so you can call me that if you so wish," the tom mewed.

Rainstone dipped her head, "Okay, Hopper," she purred as he twitched his whiskers.

"And may I then inquire what your name may be?" Hopper asked.

"Its Rainstone," she answered.

"A pretty name for a pretty she-cat," Hopper purred, yellow eyes alight. Then he shuffled his paws and abruptly dropped his gaze. Rainstone stared at him, head cocked, he obviously seemed embarrassed, she wasn't sure why, his comment was flattering, even if Rainstone didn't care.

"Sorry, I-uh-know you're expecting kits so you must already have a-uh- mate," Hopper muttered.

"Oh," Rainstone mewed, flattening her ears in embarrassment and shifting her round belly to the side. "Its okay, honest mistake," Rainstone swept on.

Hopper nodded, then squinted his eyes and stared to the west. Rainstone realized with a shock that it was already dusk. "If you-uh-need a place to sleep, you can come back to my den, I'll be happy to house you for a night," Hopper mewed friendly.

Rainstone happily accepted and padded down to his side, just staying out of reach of their fur brushing. As Hopper led her through the forest, keeping one step ahead of her as he took her on a winding path, she remembered something he'd said.

"Do no other cats live around here?" she asked.

"Not one, no foxes or badgers either, just prey," Hopper mewed, swiping his tongue over his jaws.

"Why do you live here then?" Rainstone asked.

Hopper shrugged, "I liked being on my own, and when my mom kicked me out of her den, she never really liked me, I was happy to stay away from any cats," Hopper mewed, his voice was bright, but Rainstone detected the tinge of loneliness.

"And you never thought of looking for any friends?" Rainstone asked, wondering how many moons he'd been alone, he didn't look particularly young.

"I get travelers like you once in a while, and the last time I looked for friends, I ended up with a sliced ear," Hopper growled, flattening his ears. Rainstone's eyes were drawn to a jagged slice through his ear, a deep nick as a reminder.

"Did you ever think of joining the travelers?" Rainstone asked, huffing a bit as they jumped over a fallen tree.

Hopper shook his head firmly, "Never, I like it here and I'll stay here till I'm old. I won't say no to company, but I won't go looking for it," Hopper mewed, no doubt in his eyes.

Rainstone nodded her head, she would except his wishes. For a moment, as they padded on in silence, she wondered if he'd welcome her to stay there with him while she had her kits and they grew old enough to travel with her. But she didn't want to stay in the forest and she wasn't ready to settle down quite yet.

But I don't want to be caught out in the middle of nowhere either, she thought with a twinge of unease. Then pushed the thoughts away, *I'll know when to stop.*

They soon arrived in a small clearing. The clearing was already full of fresh, green grass, an old tree grew in the hollow, growing out of the side of the little hill. Its thick, numerous roots were exposed and it appeared brambles, gorse, and ferns had been pushed into the gaps to fill them.

"Nice den," she mewed, eying the handiwork with admiration. *If only I had something like that for myself...* It'd be easy to escape if in

danger, and would give good shelter and protection.

"Go on, it's a big den and I keep an extra nest to the side for any unexpected guests," Hopper mewed, twitching his whiskers.

Rainstone purred and nodded her head, though her belly grumbled and she flattened her ears in embarrassment. "Go on, there's prey inside," Hopper encouraged, nudging her.

Rainstone nodded, scenting bird and mouse inside the dark den. Ducking under the roots, she was surprised to see how light it was, and noticed a few patches in the side where light came in. Too small to allow enemies in and easy to cover up in bad weather.

She climbed and curled down in the nest that smelled a little musty and less of Hopper. "Sorry the nest is a little old, I haven't cleaned it since leaf-bare came along," Hopper mewed, nudging the mouse toward her.

Rainstone shrugged, it was a nest, and that was better then she thought she'd get that night. She ate the mouse, enjoying the soft meat, though she still preferred something less musty. The sunlight had faded and was replaced by starlight and moonlight.

"You know," Hopper murmured, seeing her eye the stars. "I was once told that the stars were all the great cats that went before, and that if we're good, we will join them," Hopper murmured, his yellow eyes thoughtful.

Rainstone jerked her head to stare at Hopper in shock. She knew that the stars were her ancestors, but how did a cat who lived on his own know? "Who told you that?" she asked, thankful that her dark gaze melted into the darkness and he couldn't see her urgency.

"It was back when I lived near a lake, four Clans of cats live there, and they were always talking about cats in the stars," Hopper mewed, twitching his ear. "I thought it was nonsense then, but thinking about it, there might be some truth to it all," Hopper murmured.

Rainstone's ears pricked, just earlier that day Flake had told her

about four groups of cats! And now Hopper was confirming it, but she wasn't frightened, but more intrigued about these cats who knew about ancestors. *I wonder what they can tell me*, she thought, curiosity prickling at her paws.

She listened as Hopper's breathing slowed and deepen, signaling he was asleep. She fixed her eyes on the brightest star through the gap between the roots, *I'll find these Clans, Song, and I'll learn what I can about you and all my other ancestors...Alone.*

Chapter 20: Thorns For Thorns

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At daybreak the next day, Rainstone set off again, Hopper escorted her back to the river, and said goodbye, his yellow eyes bright and cheerful. "Maybe we'll see another again, someday," Hopper purred, though she could tell he didn't mean it.

Rainstone shrugged, "Never say never, but I feel I won't be coming this way again," she mewed. Then she set off, picking a trot as her pace. The day passed in silence, she stopped to rest around sun-high, but got restless and continued on her way until gray shadows announced twilight had come.

Yawning, she lapped some of the cool water from the stream, the ground under-paw was mossy and the surrounding area was covered with soaked peat that bubbled with water when she stepped on it. She shook moisture from her paws, *great, now I'm going to have to sleep in a marsh!*

She carefully cut through it as the stream, moving sluggishly, twisted around the area. The water began to pick up pace, and she hoped that the ground would slope up, away from the boggy ground. She saw the dark shadow of a rise, quickening her pace until she was bounding through the long grass. She emerged from the top and stopped stiff.

The stream raced down besides her, but now she had come to its source, a scum-topped pond. It wasn't terribly big, and the greening trees cast their shadows on the unmoving surface. She'd guess it was no longer or wider the length of the cave back in the mountain. But now she'd be without a guide.

I followed the stream from its end to its beginning! The thought tingled through her paws with satisfaction, chasing away the fear that she may end up wandering aimlessly through the forest. *I can still follow the sun west, right?* She could see the glowing aqua blue where the

sun had disappeared, leaving for the moon to rise in the sky, white with dappled gray.

A few clouds whipped across the sky, so thin it seemed the next breeze would blow them away. She stretched, the grass was short and dry beneath her paws, the bog of peat had not followed her up. She tiredly scraped together a nest of dry grass and pieces of moss. She'd hunt in the morning.

...

The following day was gray and dreary, mist hung heavy in the air and a cough racked her body as she drew in a deep breath. *Sleeping out in the open isn't particularly healthy*... But she found some coltsfoot, probably the first of the season, and ate the herbs along with a warm mouse to ease her scratchy throat.

She shook out her fur as she struck out again, heading in the direction where the sun had set the day before. But before long worry nagged at her. with the gray covering, she couldn't be sure she was heading in the right direction.

Hour after hour she padded, no sound but the whisper of her paws on the damp forest floor and the occasional cry of a bird in the trees overhead. She soon found herself in a forest of cedars and pines, the dark trees blocking her view from the sky completely and the carpeted floor beneath her paws muffled sound. She didn't like it, she felt trapped and anxious.

She nearly jumped out of her fur at the startling cry of a black crow as it swooped overhead. She shivered at the cold breeze and the icy drizzle. She felt tired, wet, and miserable. And on top of all that, she kept getting fresh whiffs of fox, badger, and even a bit of wolf. But no prey.

She glanced anxiously over her shoulder every few steps, wondering if something was stalking her in the silent world. She swallowed nervously as she imagined a wolf's sharp jaws and growled barks emerging from the mist like a shadow. She strained her eyes, but couldn't see more then a few tail-lengths around her.

She flicked her ears back as she thought she heard a thudding paw-step. The faint sound put her heart in her throat. She quickened her pace as the sound happened again, not the even tread of paw-steps, but the thump of a heavy creature that only became mortal for half a moment.

She broke into a gasping run as the sound became a quickening and rushing pounding. She let out a moan, her fear escaping from her closed jaws. She didn't like it here, she needed space to see things and the sky to breathe. Not with tall figures that loomed threateningly over her and shapes appearing suddenly from the mist in front of her. Or strange things that pursued her but had no scent.

She tripped over a branch, but pressed on, ignoring the pain and leaning more heavily on her limp. She could hear the pounding, she counted the rhythm that sped up with ever heartbeat.

She squinted her eyes, her breath was sharp in her throat, her muscles burned, her limp was jerking her off balance, and fear had nearly driven her wild. She tripped again, this time over a sharp rock and between the pain and fear, her limp paw failed to move fast enough to catch her and she fell to the ground, her muzzle driven into the pine needles while she flipped about wildly before laying still, closing her eyes and letting out a terrified moan.

She could heart the pounding, rushing and roaring, as steady as her own heartbeat... *That's it!* she thought angrily, sitting up and crossly flicking pine needles from her paws. *I was hearing my own heartbeat pounding in my ears!*

Embarrassment and shame flooded her. Embarrassed that she'd been frightened by her own heartbeat, shamed that she'd been so easily terrified and that she'd run from a presumed danger.

And now I'm exhausted and injured and won't be getting out of the forest by tonight! She glared around, the light was darkening, so she guessed that the sun was going down. *I probably would have stopped soon anyways...*

She sighed, limping painfully over to a pine tree. Its roots were slightly exposed, rising on both sides and curling like the outline of

a nest. She settled down in a tight ball, licking the bit of blood from her injured back leg.

She yawned, the mist covered her like a warm blanket now, and the silence seemed to be a soothing darkness now. How had she imagined it as such a scary place? It almost seemed like a gorse bush, protecting and hiding her as she fell fast asleep.

...

The next day was just as gray, but it was actually raining, not just misting. Rainstone turned in the direction she'd been heading in yesterday, hoping she wasn't going in circles. It took only the morning to emerge from the gloomy forest and get back into a more woody forest and the rain stopped as she passed into the bright woods.

Grass took the place of pine needles, and oak, maple, and beech trees took the place of pine and cedars. She quickly caught a starling, ravenous since she hadn't eaten since she'd entered the pines. Looking up through the haze of budding trees, she could see a few patches of blue, not that seeing the sun at sun-high was much help with navigating.

But she padded onward, the forest seeming more bright and friendly then the pine woods. She stopped a while later by a cherry tree that was in full blossom, tiny pink petals drifting through the air to land softly on the ground. *I think it'd be nice to rest here for the day, after yesterday*, she thought, remembering the wild dash through the dark pines.

She drank long and slow from a pool that had been formed by the rain storm that she'd padded out of. The breeze was fresh and cool, flattening her dirty fur. She made a small nest under the shelter of the cherry tree, pausing to wash her fur clean of pine sap, pine needles, and mud.

She yawned, she could see the sun going down now. Amazingly, she'd kept up in the right general direction, drifting only a little too far south of where she wanted to be. *I'll fix it tomorrow*, she thought with a sigh.

She wondered, as she watched the falling petals, if the forest went on forever. *It seems so, I've been padding through it for days now*. Then she realized how silly that was, she'd seen the edges of the forest as she entered back while traveling with Crystal.

She thought of her kits next, the pretty petals making her feel a little sappy. *They'll be the roses I get from the thorns, the joy from the sorrow of leaving the cave and everything I thought I once knew*. She still felt ashamed that she'd ruined the plans of helping the cats back in the cave, she'd made things worse, not better.

But maybe Night and Sun will become leaders and together make things better... She shook her head, she'd never know since she'd never go back. *Maybe one of my kits will go back one day and tell me all about it...* She drifted into a light doze, just jerking awake, fear tingling through her pelt at a small, shrill wail.

Some cat is in trouble! she thought, racing toward the noise. The stench of fox reached her and fear pulsed all the more strong, along with a wave of fury. She slowed and peaked through some gorse into a small grassy opening characterized by a fallen log and a tumble of rocks.

She stretched and made out the figure of a fox, it was smaller then the ones that'd attacked her, only a little bigger then herself. *It must be a young one*, but its black eyes shone with the same cruelty and its barks and growls were frustrated.

Rainstone maneuvered around to see a tiny, brown tabby furred tom kit cowering in a deep crack in the boulder, just out of reach, his high-pitched squeals arose every time the foxes claws brushed his fur.

"Help me! Some cat, help me!" it squealed. Rainstone flattened her ears, anger churning in her belly, she wouldn't let a fox murder a helpless kit. With a snarl of fury, she launched herself and barreled into the fox. She flung it to its side with her greater weight, thanks to her kits.

The fox scrambled to its paws and faced her, but it faltered when it looked at her. It yipped pitifully, as if unsure whether to attack such

a vicious looking creature that was as big as itself. Rainstone darted forward and raked her claws down its muzzle and shoulder, feeling blood spurt from the wounds and giving the fox its last warning.

Luckily, the young fox had made up its mind and darted away with a wail. Rainstone sighed, wondering why it hadn't been so easy to get rid of the ones that had attacked her and Flake's family. She glanced over her shoulder at the little tom kit that had crept out of the whole, his blue eyes staring at her warily.

"A 'thank you,' would be sufficient," Rainstone muttered, licking the blood from her claws and sitting awkwardly, her belly, heavy with kits, bulging out.

"T-Thanks," the kit squeaked, his eyes wide.

"Well, what are you doing all by yourself? Where's your mother?" Rainstone asked.

"With my sister," the kit answered, his eyes becoming shadowed.

Rainstone leaned down, putting her muzzle close to his face, "And where is that?" she inquired, having a few choice words for a queen who allowed her kit to wander by himself.

"At our den," the tom mewed, eyes wide.

"Show me," she ordered.

The tom nodded and led her quickly through the forest. Rainstone was impressed by his speed and navigation. He stopped by a bramble bush, a small entrance showed that it was a den. Rainstone took a deep breath of the air.

"Are you sure this is the place? I don't smell any other cats," she mewed. There was actually three other scents, but they were faint and stale, they hadn't been around here for a moon at least.

"I'm sure!" the tom mewed angrily, stomping away to a grassy clearing, two piles of rock paid on fresh growing grass. Understanding hit her heavily, they must be dead, she thought as the kit stared at the piles of rocks with wistful eyes.

"Did they die?" Rainstone asked quietly coming to stand by the tom.

The kit hung his head, his paws trembling. "They got very sick, and when they left one day, father said he'd go and travel by himself, he said he needed me here in case mother or sister came back," the kit mumbled.

Rainstone felt a tremble of anger, *just because your daughter and mate dies, doesn't mean you get to abandon your son!* She shook her head, "Did you have any other kin?" she asked.

The tom nodded his head, "My mother's sister came and visited just after my mother and sister went away and father left, she offered for me to go with her, but I said I'd stay here by myself," the tom mewed, his tone stubborn.

Rainstone flicked her tail. "Where does your mother's sister live?" she asked. *I can't take care of a kit just now, but I'm not leaving him here to die!*

"At the edge of the forest, that way," the tom flicked his tail in a southern direction. "About half a days journey from here," the tom mewed.

Rainstone groaned, she was already more south then she wanted, but she'd live. Besides, she wanted out of the forest. "Come with me," she mewed, grabbing the protesting tom and carrying him back to the cherry tree. He screeched and clawed the air, but Rainstone was in no mood to listen to his cries.

His mother and sister are not coming back, whatever he thinks. She dropped him in her nest under the cherry tree. "Now listen here, you little maggot!" she hissed as he tried to run away, putting her paw on his tail. "Your mother and sister are dead and your father abounded you, I'm taking you to your aunt until you can live on your own!" Rainstone hissed.

The tom glared at her mutinously, but couldn't leave with her paw on his tail. "When you can hunt and protect yourself, you can return, but until then, you need to live with some cat to take care of you!" she hissed. The kit couldn't be more then three moons old,

how he was still alive, she didn't know.

"I can hunt!" the tom protested.

"But you couldn't fight off that fox, it'd have killed you if I hadn't come along," Rainstone hissed. After a bit more arguing, the tom curled up in her nest with her, the night sky already up. Rainstone just sighed and fell asleep, the tom's body felt small and right on her flank.

...

"Are we there yet? Can we stop for awhile, my paws are aching! And I'm hungry! And thirsty!" the complaining mews made Rainstone growl. She glared at the little tom, she would have given him a name, but he said he didn't have one and liked it that way. *You better shut up or I'll start calling you jay!* The mountainous birds were always squeaking like they were complaining about something.

They'd been traveling for half a day, the sun a little too hot on her fur and the breeze a little too dusty. "I can't walk another step forward!" the kit cried, falling on his side dramatically.

Rainstone growled and grabbed him by the scruff, "Hang on tightly," she muttered, flinging him up on her shoulders and carrying him through the forest. He clung to her soft fur with wide, sheathed paws.

She sighed in relief as they emerged out of the forest, a field of soft, green grass rolled away from where she stood, a small pool parted the green grass and Rainstone crouched to lap up a few mouthfuls. The kit had fallen asleep on her shoulders, and she continued along, looking for any signs of cats.

Cresting a hill, she sniffed the air quickly and spotted a small wooden object, four sharp walls and a slanted roof. It stood next to a more complex one that was light colored. She headed for the dark, wooden one cautiously, smelling both cat and dog. She'd scented dog once with Crystal, and she'd been told to be wary.

She entered through a half-open wall, the dusty smell made her sneeze and she dropped the tom kit to the ground. She looked around and let out a mew. She fluffed up her fur and spun around at a yapping sound. Turning, she saw a tan creature that looked like a wolf, but smaller and didn't smell of blood.

But its jaws were still slathered with saliva and had a hunting gleam in its eye. Rainstone kicked the tom kit into a pile of straw as she faced the dog. She heard a mew and looked up in time to see a lithe yellow she-cat jump down besides the tom kit, her eyes alight with recognition.

I bet that's the aunt, knowing that the kit was safe, she could run. She darted right under the dogs belly and pelted away, her limp and heavy belly making her slow enough for the dog to stay right on her paws as she raced across the soft, green fields. But her stamina was top-notch and she raced non-stop.

As she crested a hill, she saw that in the distance behind her was a forest of stone and glittering lights. *The twolegplace, just as Hopper described it.* But she couldn't stop to look. She was darting through scrubby shrubs, the dog getting less confident as it saw it was so far from home.

Rainstone nodded as it stopped and turned, heading back the way it'd come. Rainstone sniffed, she'd run just like she had in the pine forest, except she hadn't been so terrified. *It doesn't make any sense.*

But she spotted a weeping willow tree, its branches hazed with new growth and the leaves hanging like a curtain around the tree. A river rushed besides it, one she hadn't noticed before, and was flowing north-west. She padded down the slope, limping slightly. She could see, following the river, there was a ridge.

She sniffed the air, it was fresh and clear, gray clouds starting to role over the sky. She settled herself under the willow, the grass soft and feathery. The green curtain, like ivy, made a green light in the setting sun.

Rainstone sat, but couldn't get comfortable, even as the sun set and exhaustion settled over her, she couldn't fall asleep. By the time

spasms contracted her body, she knew what was happening. *No! I'm not ready!* She willed her kits, she was exhausted and in a place she didn't know at all.

But the kits wouldn't wait, and she went through the night as if she was the only creature in the world. Her claws tore at the grass around where she lay and her screams of pain were muffled by the grass she'd torn up and pressed against her muzzle. She didn't want to attract any foxes or wolves in the area.

She panted as she watched the moonlight's silver light begin to fade, but it wasn't setting. Thunder rolled above her and lighting flashed, she screamed during the thunder, when the trembling sound muffled her.

Rain pelted down heavily and she briefly wondered if the river by her would flood into her hovel. But the willow kept her mostly sheltered from the rain, its heavy leaves keeping her dry, since there was no wind to shake it.

Of course, with no wind to blow the leaves, there was no wind to blow the storm away, and it sat and festered over her all through the night, just as strong as when she finally kitted, the most painful spasms leaving her half-unconscious for a few moments.

But the pain was gone now, and she lifted her head in the dark. In a flash of lighting, she made out two figures. Fear gripped her heart and tore it apart. One of the tiny creatures wasn't moving. She pawed it close to her, it was small, it had stubby ears and a half-formed tail. *It must have been killed when I was attacked by the fox*, she thought numbly, grief seizing her.

She turned to her other kit, it was breathing, but its heartbeat was so faint she could hardly make it out and it seemed to be growing more infrequent. *No! I can't lose both kits, I just can't!* She found herself begging Song and all her other ancestors for her kit's life as she licked it roughly and pressed it to her scarred belly to keep it warm.

But the creature gave a shuddering breath just as gray light was strengthening and it fell silent. Rainstone stared at the two

unmoving kits in numb grief. Why weren't they moving? They were supposed to be nursing at her belly, weren't they? They were supposed to be breathing, making little mewls, right?

Is there something wrong with them? She asked herself, prodding them with a paw, waiting for them to do something. They were supposed to grow up, play, fight, and travel with her! But the cold scent of death mingled with fresh life, and pain seared through her. The pain of seeing lives not even begun, ended.

She could make out that they'd both been toms, the stillborn one had a black pelt, like Night. *Does he have his orange-amber eyes?* The other tom was a light brown tabby, like her father. *But I know he would have been better then my father...* Rainstone bowed her head, her ears flattened to her head in pain and anger, anger at death that had claimed the two things she'd loved and wanted more then anything when she'd lost all else.

The rain still pattered on the leaves of the willow, and Rainstone scooped up the two tiny bodies, digging under the willow two small holes. She placed her kits in the holes, eyes so bleary she couldn't see correctly. She remembered how the tom kit in the forest had piles of stones to mark out the grave of his mother and sister.

Life is fair rotten, isn't it? She thought the words, would have told them to some cat if she hadn't been alone. She stumbled out from under the willow. Lighting flashed above her head and thunder boomed loud enough to deafen a cat, as if angry that she dared defy the storm. *I couldn't care if you struck me down.*

She padded to the river, it was muddy and swollen, but some of the rocky shore was left uncovered. The rain pattered down, it had soaked her in a heartbeat, but she hardly noticed as she rolled rocks together with numb paws.

She returned to the two small graves and carefully stacked a mound of rock on each one. She looked at the graves, sadness welling up in her. *They were supposed to be the roses I got from thorns! But it seems I just got more thorns.*

Bitter and empty feeling, she left the willow again and stumbled to

a thorn bush, she bit down on a stem and pulled it away, ignoring the thorns that cut her lip and tongue. She returned to the graves, biting the thorn tendril in half and placing a half on top of each mound of rocks, securing it by placing the top rock on it.

She swallowed hard, the thorns looked too harsh on the brown and gray rock. She looked around, spotting two flowers, a white daisy and a yellow daffodil. She placed them under the rock with the thorns. *White and yellow, I'll never like those colors again.*

Turning away, she stepped back into the rain. She raised her head to the sky. The rain pelted down even harder. "Are you happy now?!" she screeched, pain and anger battling inside her empty belly.

All she got in answer was a thunderous roar... except their hadn't been any lighting and the roar grew louder and louder... Rainstone turned her head, not even caring anymore. A wall of muddy water was bearing down on her, ten tail-lengths high and a whisker away from her.

She closed her jaws, taking a deep breath as it swept her away, the surge of water chocked her, shocked her, enveloped her. She couldn't care less, it seemed fitting, after her kits had died that she should as well. Now she had no legacy or reminder of her life in the world. *I wish for roses and I get thorns.*

Chapter 21: Strange Cats and Dreams

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Water filled his mouth, its gritty, muddy taste foreign to him who was used to clear mountain streams. It tugged at his fur, whirled him around in is murky darkness, bashed him against rocks again and again until he felt broken.

Then it changed, more friend then foe, washing away his pain and enveloping him in a dark blanket of exhaustion, diminishing the last light which played in front of his eyes. Taking him to a place where there was nothing waiting but death.

Sun jerked awake from sheer fear, his breath coming in hoarse gasps. He sat in the middle of the hunters sleeping cave, darkness pressed all around him and he knew it was still the middle of the night. He'd been dreaming again.

He didn't lie back down though, but crept out and sat in the middle of the tunnel entrance, which he found by trailing his whiskers along the wall. He strained to see some moonlight behind the ivy curtain or through the narrow strip of opening.

He couldn't see anything, and guessed clouds had covered the sky again, though he could hear the quiet dribble of the stream. He let the cool air of the cave wash away the nightmarish dream, but he couldn't forget it.

It was the fourth time he'd had it in the past four nights, it sent tugs of wariness through him whenever he heard water. He closed his eyes and an image seared in front of his closed eyes. A dark gray she-cat whose fur looked blue in certain light, dark blue eyes glowing cold with anger and rebellion.

Rainstone... He missed his father's sister like he'd miss a close friend.

They hadn't even had time to say goodbye properly, she'd left so fast. She'd been the only cat to encourage his spirit and kit-hood pranks. Her sharp mind and spirit had won his admiration. She'd conducted herself with more dignity then many more toms that had more power.

Speaking of power... He sighed to know he'd been given the right to leadership after it'd been stripped from his father and brother who deserved it more. His father's father had re-given him inheritance to leadership after his new kit son had died.

Eh, he'd have been a terrible leader anyways, in the kit's two moon life; he'd proved himself to be a disrespectful, arrogant, self-conceited cat. Granted if he'd lived he may have mellowed out, but he definitely wouldn't have worked with Night to fix things up for the she-cats.

The little kit had wandered out after a patrol a few days ago and had gotten himself caught by an eagle. The patrol he had followed had heard the commotion and come running, but had been too late to save the kit. And Sun had been once again given leadership; since Droplet's other kit was a she-kit.

"Are you okay?" the soft spoken voice shot fear through him until he recognized the voice as Pine, his she-cat. He winced; he hated calling the kit his she-cat. Pine was the three moon kit of Frost, who'd kitted when she was six moons old; the age in which she was supposed to be just old enough to mate.

Of course, Tangle hadn't gotten in trouble for mating with the too young she-cat. Cats had joked and laughed it off and Hawk had made a half-harsh statement about respecting the rules.

Sun drew the kit close to him by touch. Pine certainly was pretty, prettier than her other sister and more so than her brother. In fact, she was the only kit not deformed from the birth of the too young mother. Her brother just had stubbly ears and a stub for a tail, but her sister was missing half a leg.

Pine, however, with her dark brown, black, and sap colored calico pelt, was pretty and whole. And since he was going to be leader,

he'd been given the best kit to be his mate. Not that he ever planned on mating with her until she was ready. And he promised himself he would only do it until he had kits to become leader after him, never again.

"I'm fine, don't worry, just a bad dream," Sun mewed.

Pine stretched and awkwardly licked his cheek. Sun winced, "Don't do that," he murmured and Pine flinched. "And don't worry, I'll never hurt you," he promised, his voice ringing with truth. "But let's just be friends for now, okay? Nothing more," he mewed with a purr.

He heard Pine nodding her head vigorously against his fur. "Good, now let's go back to our nest," Sun mewed, picking the kit up by the scruff and curling down around her protectively in the midst of toms and she-cats. He could hear quite squeaks and movement and knew that Hare was working on his mate, Twist.

He covered Pine's young ears in case she could recognize the sounds of mating. He wanted her to keep her kit-hood as long as she could. He knew that Rainstone had been forced to leave kit-hood at the age of two moons, growing up faster than any cat.

The thought of Rainstone reminded him of his dream; he couldn't help but imagine Rainstone's dark-gray fur, turned black by being full of water, drowning in a raging torrent of rushing water. Why did he make the connection? He didn't know, but he felt as sure as the sun would rise the next morning that Rainstone had either drowned, or was in danger of drowning. And his helplessness swamped over him like the water.

...

Sun yawned open his jaws the next morning, the rest of his sleep had been dreamless, but the dark nightmare still hovered at the back of his mind as he groomed his blazing yellow fur before helping Pine struggle with her soft kit fur.

Pity stabbed through him as he looked at the tiny she-cat in the faint golden light. Her paws were trembling and her tiny tongue

struggled against the knots. *A kit so long should still be drinking milk from her mother's belly, still be playing with littermates and being cared for by a mother.*

It sent a surge of anger and his paws itched to be leader so he could change things. The first thing he would do was make it so that no cat, not even she-kits, could leave the kit-den until they were five moons old. "Okay, let's go get some breakfast," he mewed, leading the kit to the fresh-kill pile.

He eyed the cats sanding around, he didn't want any cat to come and bother Pine as he went up to the fresh-kill pile. The last tom to get close to her with a half -crazed look in his eyes had terrified Pine. He glared at Snake, who had been the perpetrator on that account.

"Why don't you got stand by Night?" he suggested, seeing the tom who had become a very close friend as they'd planned to get Rainstone out of the mountains and save her from certain death. Pine nodded, she knew Night.

As the kit stood by the yawning black tom, Sun quickly grabbed a large mouse, Pine still didn't eat much and he didn't have a big appetite. He padded over to Night who had been joined by Tinge, the she-cat he had taken as a mate after Rainstone had left.

Both of their fur was ruffled and they looked on edge. *Mating again?* He looked at Tinge, her eyes were happy and excited; at least she enjoyed it. Night however, looked sullen and lonely, as if all the affection in the world didn't matter unless it came from a dark gray she-cat with dark eyes.

He winced in sympathy; the tom had lost his mate whom he'd loved and his unborn kits. *Though they're probably born now*, he mused. *I wonder what they look like...* He wondered if Night was thinking about that as he looked off into the distance, as if seeing nothing and everything at the same time.

He remembered his dream and hoped he was just having nightmares that didn't matter. "How are you today?" he asked formally, nodding at Night.

"Fine, and you?" the black tom's words were automatic, he was still dreaming of his lost love. Tinge sat down and pressed herself against the leader, but her eyes were narrowed and jealous, obviously wishing to hold the attention he gave the lost cat.

"Rainstone is fine; she has a life thanks to you! And so do your kits! Isn't that something to be proud of?" Sun leaned forward to whisper. Night sighed and nodded, his eyes focusing on him and Sun shivered at the cold grief in his eyes.

"But I miss her, her voice, her fur, her breath, her spirit; I just miss everything about her with every breath I take," Night mewed, his voice hoarse as if he was going to cry.

Sun stared at him hard, "Rainstone wouldn't have wanted that, she would want you to be happy. But you won't be happy if you don't allow yourself to be!" Sun mewed; his voice was harsh, though he was full of sympathy. He, himself, missed the dark gray she-cat. Every day was gray for him, no spark of warmth in the drab cave. But he was dedicated to making things better, so he'd make the best of things for now.

But now it was time to work through another day out in the thawing world that still left him cold. But he felt a twinge of satisfaction as he went to bed late that night. Passing by Night's den; he heard the soft murmurs of Tinge and the responding soft murmurs of Night; he was finally moving on.

The thought was both happy and sad; to see life moving on as Rainstone just became a beloved memory. Sun padded to the cave entrance and stared at the moonlit expanse of wet earth and freezing snow. In the distance were the tall, dark, shadowy forms of the encircling mountains, keeping the cats safe and protected under its never moving stance.

Out there somewhere is Rainstone... Who knows, maybe she's just beyond sight, or maybe she's hundreds of miles from here... I just hope she's safe and happy and well.

...

"Flickertail! Where are you going?" the youthful red-brown tom with cream dappled spots and warm amber eyes turned his gaze on the speaker, his sister, Sweetberry.

"Got to go collect herbs, the flood washed out all my stocks," he called back to the pretty honey-gold she-cat. The heavy rains and the sudden snow-melt had swollen all the streams until they were raging rivers of muddy water.

RiverClan had been hit hardest by it, living in a tangle of streams. They had been forced to evacuate camp for two days, and when they'd returned, the whole camp had been at least partly destroyed. Only the elders den at the highest point of camp had escaped the floods intact.

Even in the midst of the disaster, they'd been lucky. No cat had died and no cat had gotten sick or seriously injured while he'd been without herbs. The Clan couldn't afford any more casualties after several cats had been lost to green-cough when he'd failed to pick catmint before frost had scorched it.

The weight of that failure followed him like his shadow, especially since it'd been his first leaf-bare without a mentor. But he was determined to make up for it by not losing any cat in the flood and keeping the Clan healthy as far as he was able.

"Do you want a cat to go with you?" Sweetberry asked padding closer, green eyes narrowed. Flickertail shook his head, feeling a twinge of irritableness. Ever since their mother had died when they were apprentices, Sweetberry had tried to take care of him.

"The warriors need to stay back and fix up camp. Don't worry, I'm only going to the marshy area," he added with a hint of a growl. Sweetberry hesitated then nodded.

"But be back before dusk, or I'll come after you," she mewed, padding away with a wave of her tail. Flickertail rolled his eyes, she was bossier then the deputy sometimes!

Padding out of camp, he used a log that'd gotten stuck over the stream that flowed alongside camp. It was still dangerously flooded,

brown and rushing swift enough to drag even experienced swimmers down. He jumped up on the smooth wood, using his flicking tail for balance.

On the other wide, the ground that was usually sandy was covered with muddy water and he had to slosh through the filth a few steps before being back on the green grass that was starting to grow. He headed north-west, planning on seeing if some of his plants by the far stream had survived the flood.

He didn't have high hopes, since that was the largest stream and could be called a river even when it'd been dry. He shivered as a chilly breeze blew a cold drizzle in his face. Apparently the gray clouds weren't empty yet. They'd covered the lake for three days, the real flooding had only just happened yesterday when water upstream had swollen everything out of its already expanded banks.

At least the snow's gone, the rain had washed the last piles of snow away and cleared the way for new-leaf to fully arrive. He could see tiny leaves speckling the trees and blossoms peeking out all white and pink against the drab sky.

I can't imagine how ThunderClan can stand so much undergrowth, he thought as he tripped on one of the few bramble bushes in his territory. Most of the ground was clear and grassy, maybe a mossy rock or a fallen log and a stray bracken or bramble bush. But the sound of rushing water filled the air with its lovely rushing noise.

Like all RiverClan cats, he was born with a love for water and had an eye for pretty things such as shiny rocks or pretty shells. His medicine-cat den had been full of sparkly objects, now he'd just have to collect more when he found free time.

He sniffed the air as he came close to the river. He veered off course to stand under a willow tree, a bit of marshy ground surrounded it. He flicked his tail in content as he found a bunch of watermint, it wasn't an especially strong herb, but for common bellyaches and sniffles he could use it.

What he really wanted to find was marigold or goldenrod, and some tansy and juniper berries. He knew he could find juniper berries in

the marshy ground near the gathering island, and maybe some marigold around there as well, though he didn't know if it was too early for it to be growing well.

That's the case for every other herb... I was a kit this time last season. But I suppose I can ask the other medicine-cat's at the Moonpool gathering in a few days... He mused as he sniffed around the marshy ground. He found a bunch of mallow and shrugged to himself when he couldn't find anything else.

By now the blasts of drizzle were steadier and his paws were wet and cold. But he was going to check along the river before he went home. It wasn't dusk yet and if Sweetberry was going to worry about him like he was a kit, then so be it!

With the sense of rebellion churning in his belly, he laid his herbs on a smooth, moss-covered rock for him to collect on the way back. Then with his head high and his tail flicking restlessly behind him, he stomped toward the river.

It was quite a sight, bulged to three times its normal size, the stream which they usually crossed by means of submerged rocks was now a churning torrent of dark brown water and foaming white tops. While the scattered debris under his paws showed it'd been even higher in the first surge.

Flickertail picked his way around deposits of sand and gravel and watched his paws as he padded past a splintered log of wood. He padded to the spot where some marigold had grown last green-leaf. He let out a hiss of annoyance, though not surprise, when he saw the ground was stripped of grass and any other green bits.

I'll have to find marigold elsewhere then. Shaking his head, he was padding away when he heard a faint sound above the loud rumble of the river. He glanced around, he was close to the border and his fur pricked with wariness that there might be rogues nearby.

As a medicine-cat he wasn't trained in fighting like his Clan-mates, and his mentor had been too old to show him even the basics. A few real warriors had taught him basic defense moves, mostly against foxes or badgers that he'd more likely come across alone.

His amber eyes scanned the green-brown upward slope with icy sharpness, but saw nothing and after a moment of hearing nothing, he shrugged it off. But he'd gone only a few paw-steps when he heard the sound again, a moan of utter despair.

He looked around downstream now, since the sound seemed to float from that direction. He saw nothing but a faint heap of dark gray rock half covered in mud and streaked with... red? No, he frowned to himself as he picked his way hurriedly over.

His pace quickened as he saw a tail sticking out from the rock, the long tail being pulled at by the river which the sodden creature, whatever it was, was still half lying in. A few steps away the creature's scent bathed his tongue.

It told him this was a she-cat, injured, recently kitted, and definitely not from around here. The she-cat's dark gray fur looked smoky black, with a sheen of blue like on an iridescent black bird. The body of the she-cat caught his eye.

Instead of the body types of the Clans, large RiverClan cats, lithe WindClan cats, broad-shouldered ThunderClan cats, and lanky ShadowClan cats. This cat was small, like the size of a large WindClan cat, and had a round face, like a kit.

He also noticed that her ears seemed too large for her small head, and her tail was long and wispy, even while sodden. As well, he noticed her paws were large and wide. He'd say they made her look clumsy if it not for the arch in them, as if the cat had been forced to walk on unstable and sharp ground for too long.

Then he turned his attention to the stream of blood running from her head. A wound on the back of her head streamed with blood and water, but other than that she seemed to be intact. He darted away for a heartbeat and grabbed some cobwebs and came back, quickly covering her wound and stopping the blood flow.

He then turned his attention to her breathing; it was shallow and fast and gurgled in her throat. Frowning, he massaged her chest like he would with a kit that'd fallen into the water without learning to swim. It worked and the strange cat coughed up several mouthfuls

of murky water before falling back and lying still except for the flutter of her chest to show she was breathing.

Flickertail frowned some more, this she-cat was in shock and had a chill, but she should be responding more now. It was as if she had no will to survive. Then he remembered the fresh milk scent on her and eyed her saggy belly, the signs of a recently kitted queen.

He winced in sympathy, *they must have been swept away by the flood, she lost her kits, poor thing*. He stretched forward and grabbed her scruff, dragging the rest of the way out of the water. There wasn't much he could do for a rogue who didn't want to live any longer, and he had no obligation to her as she wasn't a Clan cat.

Of course, if she'd been a Clan cat, she'd have more to live for, but rogues lived for themselves and maybe for their families. If her family was gone, she wouldn't have much anything to live for. But he looked at the she-cat and knew something was wrong with her beyond the loss of her kits.

Here was a she-cat hardly a moon older then a new warrior, half drowned and mourning lost kits. Most she-cats wouldn't be expecting kits until they were at least three moons older. But there was something else in her soaked, kit-like face.

There were hard-lines and stony features that a cat had after seeing a much too bloody battle. And they were hard on her face, as if they'd been there a long time, which was hard to believe since this cat was younger than he.

What horrors has she witnessed? What nightmares has she lived? Like most cats, he knew little of what went on beyond Clan boundaries. The images and daydreams of ghastly gore were innumerable and held him in horrified fascination.

Did she watch her parents murdered? Torn apart by dogs or foxes? Did her littermates get eaten by a badger and she narrowly escaped? Was she forced to mate and watch other too young cats forced to mate? He stopped dead at the dirty though. He was a medicine-cat, and not even in his grisly day-dreams must he imagine such things.

But the thought continued and he imagined the small gray cat half-dead before him surrounded in a ring of shadowy shapes and glowing red eyes that were yipping and cheering. The young she-cat screaming in fear and protest as a large tom set himself on her. He stopped the image short of the actual forced mating, he'd never seen it happen so he wasn't sure how it went, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Besides, he never wanted to mate, it sounded dirty and horribly barbaric for a medicine-cat to do such a thing. He shook himself and looked at the little she-cat in front of him. Her breathing had grown fainter again and he feared she'd not recover if she didn't get someplace warm fast.

Will Sunstar allow her to stay in camp? He pictured the large yellow tom sighing in consent, his orange eyes annoyed as he took on another problem. *Probably, though I doubt he'll be happy!*

And with a playful look on his face, he grabbed her scruff and started dragging the surprisingly light she-cat toward camp. His hunt for herbs forgotten as he imagined what stories this cat could tell him about the outside world once recovered.

But something else had been biting at him. The build of this she-cat... it was not something he'd never seen before. He'd seen it on a larger cat, one who better fit the abnormally sized paws and tail and ears. *Oh yes, ThunderClan's rogue warrior they found last leaf-fall... He always had such prickly looking fur!*

Legacy: Clan Alliances

RiverClan

Leader: Sunstar- Large, dark yellow tom with orange eyes

Deputy: Mintbreeze- Pale silver she-cat with darker tabby stripes and pale green eyes

Medicine-cat: Flickertail- Red-brown tom with cream dappled spots and amber eyes

Warriors:

Silverstripe- Lanky, gray tom with silver tabby stripes and blue eyes

Stormfang- Creamy she-cat with dark brown stripes and amber eyes

Antfoot- Dark brown tom with lighter brown paws, underbelly and green eyes

Creekshade- Black she-cat with dark green eyes

Webclaw- Wiry gray tom with white paws, muzzle and blue eyes

Sweetberry- Honey-gold she-cat with green eyes

Cedarheart- Orange tom with blue eyes

Willowwater- Gray tabby with black ear-tips and green eyes

Apprentices:

Dawnpaw- Sand-gold she-cat with aqua eyes and long, fluffy tail

Pikepaw- Pale brown tom with sandy stripes and gray eyes

Cloudypaw- Fluffy, white she-cat with pale silver-blue patches and yellow eyes

Queens:

Ottertail- Brown she-cat with orange tabby markings and blue eyes. Mate- Antfoot

Kits:

Patchkit- Brown and white tom with mixed-matched ears and blue eyes(Ottertail)

Carpkit - Silver tom with white paws and green eyes(Ottertail)

Flashkit- Black she-cat with shimmering, soft fur and bright gray

eyes(Ottertail)

Elders:

Mudtail- Old, dark brown tom with half-blind green eyes

Sheeplight- Pale cream and white she-cat with rose-colored ears and amber eyes

ThunderClan

Leader: Stormstar- Dark gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Deputy: Pinefur- Copper-brown tom with green eyes

Medicine-cat: Skypool- Silver-blue she-cat with darker gray-blue patches and white paws with green eyes

Warriors:

Spiderfoot- Gray and black tom with twisted forepaw and amber eyes

Applefang- Skinny, tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes

Sunstorm- Ginger tom with green eyes

Ivyfur- Silver tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

Hawkstrike- Mottled brown and white tom with amber eyes

Icewhisker- Light gray tom with blue eyes

Thornfur- Brown and black tabby tom with green eyes

Lightingblaze- White tom with golden stripe down his back and amber eyes

Spiritstorm- Silver tabby she-cat with ice blue eyes

Wanderheart- White she-cat with dark, blue-gray paws and sharp blue eyes

Scampfur- Black and red tom with unruly fur and bright amber eyes.

Apprentices:

Leopardpaw- Golden she-cat with black spots and green eyes

Vinepaw- Small, dark brown tabby tom with lighter belly and green eyes

Queens:

Wispheart- Dainty, storm-gray she-cat with lighter paws and ears; blue-gray eyes. Expecting. Mate- Scampfur

Whitemist-White she-cat with ginger patches and ginger spots. Mate-Sunstorm

Kits:

Fogkit-White tom with blue eyes and blind in one eye(Whitemist)

Firekit- Ginger tom with green eyes(Whitemist)

Elders:

Nightshade- Black tom with orange-amber eyes

Dovewhisp- Silver tabby she-cat with dark gray spots and blue eyes

WindClan

Leader: Splashstar- Red she-cat with orange patch on her back and blue eyes

Deputy: Wrentail- Dark brown tom with white underbelly and orange eyes

Medicine-cat: Mallowfoot- Old, yellow tom with white paw and blue eyes

Apprentice: Willowpaw- Red she-cat with black stripes and green eyes

Warriors:

Ravenflight- Senior, dark gray she-cat with faint black stripes with blue eyes and a bobbed tail

Crowpelt- Black pelt with green eyes

Frostshine- Pale gray she-cat with white paws, tail-tip, belly, and face with blue eyes

Flightfrost- Muscular, dark brown tabby tom with ice blue eyes

Rosepetal- Cream she-cat with green eyes

Cavepath- Brown tom with dark gray streaks and green eyes

Littleleap- Unusually small light gray she-cat with long fur and sky-blue eyes

Jumpblaze- Ginger tom with white stripe from between his eyes to his tail-tip and blue eyes

Bouncepelt- Orange and white tom with amber eyes

Apprentices:

Redpaw- Ginger she-cat with long tail and orange eyes

Gorsepaw- Golden tabby tom with blue eyes

Queens:

Mothbreeze- Tall, light brown she-cat with amber eyes. Expecting. Mate- Cavepath

Wildpoppy- Long-legged dark gray she-cat with lighter stripes and rose-tinted amber eyes

Kits:

Twigkit- Slender, thin, muddy brown tom with piercing green eyes(Wildpoppy)

Honeykit- Bulky, yellow-orange she-cat with brown stripes and round amber eyes(Wildpoppy)

Deerkit- Skinny, tan colored she-cat with white spots and blue eyes(Wildpoppy)

Elders:

Cherryfall- Dark ginger and white she-cat with pale pink nose and green eyes

Flamecloud- Ginger tom with red stripes and amber eyes

ShadowClan

Leader: Duststar- Lanky, sandy brown tom with brown eyes

Deputy: Wolfseed- Smoky gray she-cat with hard gray eyes

Medicine-cat: Milkberry- White-cream she-cat with black patches and hazel eyes

Apprentice: Marshpaw- Gold and white tom with one black ear and amber eyes

Warriors:

Silverwing- Silver-blue tom with gray eyes

Shadowripple- Black she-cat with faint stripes and green eyes

Shimmerclaw- Torbie she-cat with pale green eyes

Crowclaw- Black tom with pointed ears and amber eyes

Dawndapple- Orange she-cat with brown dapples and yellow eyes

Falconscreech- Long-furred ginger tabby tom with forest-green eyes

Sunfire- Yellow-gold she-cat with brown eyes

Frogfoot- Wide-pawed murky-brown tom with green eyes

Newtlight- Ginger, white, tawny, and black tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes

Needlepine- Dark red and orange tom with bubbly green eyes

Thistlebranch- White, gray-brown, dull ginger tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentices:

Pinepaw- Dark brown tom with lighter paws and ear fur; dark green eyes

Flamepaw- Ginger tom with blue eyes

Snowpaw- White she-cat with green eyes

Queens:

Nightshade- Dark gray she-cat with black ears, paws, and tail and dark blue eyes. Mate- Falconschreech

Shadebreeze- Black she-cat with gray, curling stripes and gray-green eyes. Mate-unknown

Kits:

Flamekit- light ginger she-kit with black tail and bright green eyes(Nightshade)

Thornkit- Dark gray tom with ginger-ringed tail and blue eyes (Nightshade)

Windkit- Light gray she-cat with blue eyes(Shadebreeze)

Cedarkit- Brown tom with thin, darker brown curling stripes and gray-green eyes(Shadebreeze)

Elders:

Stormfeather- Old, blue-gray mottled she-cat with missing fur and long scars and brown eyes

Dewberry- Light brown she-cat with a cream ring around her tail and blue eyes

Sapfoot- Russet tom with a black tipped tail and ears and green eyes

Chapter 22: New World

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"I need to go to the Moonpool tonight! I must share with my ancestors!" the voice, deep but clear, signaled a young tom to Rainstone. She lay perfectly still, she was shaking with confusion, but if there were toms around here, she'd stay still until she found their intentions.

She felt a lump in her throat as she recalled what had happened before she'd blacked out. Her kits had died and the flood had whirled her away until she gave in completely. She didn't even understand how she was alive; she'd half-expected to see Song ready to take her away like she'd done with Dusty.

She knew what had awoken her, *ancestors*. The word that she'd presumed only she understood, was being used with such confidence and regularity that she felt her own understanding must be shaky and thin. She listened back to the conversation.

"It isn't safe, the rivers are still in flood and you can't get around them without swimming. I will not lose any cat to them. If StarClan wishes to speak with you, they can do so here," the tone of an older tom rang with authority and finality.

The other tom scuffed his paws, sending a bit of cold mud splashing against her back leg and she shivered. "And you have that cat to take care of, if she doesn't come through soon, we need to figure out what to do with her," the older tom added, and Rainstone almost felt two pairs of eyes trained on her and she wanted to wiggle uncomfortably.

She heard a sigh of resignation from the younger cat. "Fine, Sustar, I'll stay back this moon," the young tom's voice was full of wistful longing.

She heard the swish of a tail through the air. "Thank you,

Flickertail, I'm sure StarClan will understand," Sunstar mewed, his voice growing more distant and she heard the sound of retreating paw-steps, they sounded muffled through. She heard the other tom, Flickertail, sigh and turn away, following the *Sunstar*.

Left alone to herself, Rainstone dared opened her eyes. The images and colors were hazy at first, but gradually fell into place. She lay in a soft moss and feather nest stretched out on her side, her dead paw folded awkwardly in front of her muzzle.

The den was muddy and a swollen stream edged along the side of the wall, running past near her tail. Stacks of herbs lay on thick waxy leaves to protect them from the mud. She recognized some, but not all. She wrinkled her nose in disgust, she had never seen such a big stock; obviously she was with a group of cats, not just a few rogues.

Maybe those cats Flake and Hopper mentioned? The river that had carried her away would have been heading in the direction Hopper had said they lived. Fear and curiosity filled her, Flake had told her to be weary of these cats, and Hopper had told her they were alright as long as you didn't bother them.

Rainstone tried to push herself up in a sitting position, but her heart was as heavy as her paws and she fell back down, panting. She couldn't help but picture her two tiny tom kits, covered by earth and rocks and brambles and flowers.

It stuck icy thorns in her heart and she could have cried in pain. She shut her eyes tight and suddenly felt a surge of anger toward these cats. They should have let her die! She didn't want to live, and she would have died if they had left her alone. She felt empty and alone.

She could feel the poultice on the back of her head, it would have become infected and she'd have died from that if she had not drowned first. Why couldn't they have just let her die, let her shed off the pain and sorrow of this life. Maybe walk with Song back to the mountains and watch her family from above...in the stars.

She felt as if she'd been denied a life instead of saved. She rolled

over so that her face was turned toward the mud wall of the cave. She studied the den without thinking of it. It was completely a mud and dirt den, hollowed out by the stream no doubt. The ground sloped up a little and was sandy at the entrance where sunlight shone in.

She growled at it, how could it be so bright? While she lay in the shadows and thought of two kits who would have loved to play in its warmth, but had been denied that chance. She swallowed hard as she felt tears blurring her vision. She pushed them back down; they'd do her no good.

She forced herself into a sitting position again, this time able to maintain balance as her head spun and she leaned heavily on her feeling paw, her other one was still bent awkwardly. She straightened her posture, feeling her back ache at the effort, but it cleared her hurting head.

She stumbled to her paws and half-limped, half-tumbled, over to the stream. How mouth was parched and she lapped up the water. It wasn't clear like the mountain water, but it was clearer then the puddles she'd drunk from in the forests. The ground under the water was silt, but looked like sand. A few rocks lay in the stream and broke the water's surface, causing the water to foam around it as it pushed past.

Rainstone shook her head and limped back to the nest she'd laid in. She sat impatiently, tail flicking behind her. She settled down to washing herself, although she was quite clean, as if some cat had groomed her. She stopped and stared ahead coldly as the young tom reappeared. She recognized him by the pattern of his paw-steps, though he caught her curiosity at once.

He had an odd pelt, red-brown fur with cream dapple spots and warm amber eyes that reminded her of the sun on a brisk day in the season when it changed from warm to cold. His eyes lit up as he saw her and he padded to her quickly.

"You're awake! How are you feeling?" he asked her, standing in front of her, tail flicking non-stop behind him.

"Err-fine," she rasped, aware of how scratchy her voice was to his clear one.

The tom sniffed at her wound and nodded, "I was beginning to worry something else was wrong," the tom mewed cheerfully, eyes friendly. It just made Rainstone feel more wretched.

"Why did you save me," she snapped sharply, glaring up at him. She was painfully aware of his tall, lanky form and her own small, skinny one. He also had smaller paws then her and smaller ears and a shorter tail, not at all like the cats se was used to.

The tom looked surprised; "Because you were dying of course!" the tom mewed. Rainstone eyed his still flicking tail and remembered his name was Flickertail.

"Why would that mater, I don't know you," she growled, her voice less scratchy than before.

"Because my medicine-cat code tells me I cannot ignore a cat in trouble," the tom answered, raising his head proudly. Rainstone let out a little snarl.

"My life wasn't yours to save," she hissed, still glaring up at him.

"Oh, did you have someone else in mind?" Flickertail asked, looking as if he was growing steadily agitated.

"No, I didn't want to be saved," Rainstone growled. Flickertail's eyes softened and Rainstone was aware of her saggy belly and the painful feeling of too much milk with no kits to drink it. He must have come to the conclusion.

"Your kits would have wanted you to live," the tom mewed gently, laying his tail on her shoulder.

Rainstone shrugged it off sharply. "Not when it's my fault they're dead," she mewed bitterly, struggling to hide her emotions.

"Don't be hard on yourself, you were a rogue, there wasn't much you could do to save them by yourself," Flickertail mewed.

Rainstone glared at him so angrily that he frowned. "I'm not a rogue," she snarled viciously. She lashed out with her claws unsheathed on her frozen paw. The force of her swing sliced the tom's ear, but because she couldn't flex her frozen paw, it wasn't very deep, but would be enough to leave a nick at least.

Before she knew what was happening, there was a screech of fury from above her head and then a blur of gold and cream flashed in her vision. She was wrenched backward by her shoulders and she screeched in pain and anger as her head injury collided with the hard ground.

Paws held her shoulders, claws piercing her skin lightly. She kicked with her hind legs but to no avail and a cat was stepping on her frozen paw that was twisted, and even through the numbness she could feel the pain twisting through her leg.

The cat, she though it was the cream one, shifted forward, twisting the delicate bones of her paw as if it would pop right off. Her screeches of defiance turned to cries of pain and she started begging.

"Stop it! Get off her right now!" Flickertail's commanding voice broke through her agony and she felt a surge of relief and throbbing pain as the weight on her paw shifted before vanishing. She quickly drew her released paw up toward her face for her to examine it.

It didn't look like anything was wrong; other than it was twisted at an odd angle and the fur looked squished. She grabbed her paw with her teeth and untwisted it, feeling the last prickles of pain ebb away. Then she turned to glare at her attackers, their paws spattered with blood.

One was a creamy she-cat with mud-brown stripes and amber eyes. The other was a honey-gold she-cat with glaring green eyes. "You hurt my brother," the golden she-cat snarled, her lips drawn up in a snarl and she stepped protectively in front of Flickertail who rolled his eyes.

"Really, it's just a scratch, Sweetberry," Flickertail mewed in embarrassment, showing the hardly scratched ear to the gold she-

cat, a trickle of blood staining his fur.

"You let a rogue, an ungrateful rogue whose life you saved, do that to you and you're going to brush it off?!" Sweetberry yelped, eyes wide in amazement.

"I never asked to be saved," Rainstone growled again, once more feeling the weight on her chest as she thought of her poor dead kits... dead so that she could live.

The cream cat was looking at her curiously and with sympathy, she was older then the two siblings and had obviously noticed that she was a mother with no kits. "What happened before you were swept downstream?" the cream she-cat asked, distracting her from the siblings continued bickering.

Rainstone shrugged, trying to remember, "I helped a lost kit find its family and then led a dog away before kitting then was swept downstream," she responded curtly.

She wasn't sure what she had said that had drawn all attention to her, but all eyes were trained on her. "You outran a dog while so close to kitting?" the cream she-cat asked, sounding impressed.

"Yes... that is what I said," Rainstone mewed, feeling irritated.

"Well, that's very impressive," the cream she-cat mewed with a slight purr. Rainstone would have thought she was friendly if not for her blood on the she-cat's paws.

"Not really, it was a small dog and easy to lose once away from its home," Rainstone mewed with a shrug.

The cream she-cat studied her for a moment longer, "What is your name?"

Rainstone twitched her ears, "What is *your* name?" she asked stubbornly.

The older cream she-cat rolled her eyes. "It's Stormfang, then that's Sweetberry" she added, nodding at the gold she-cat still eyeing her suspiciously. Then turned to nod at Flickertail, "And I assume you

know Flickertail," she mewed.

"Yes, pleased to meet you," Rainstone muttered under her breath. "My name is Rainstone," she mewed more clearly.

"Where are you from?" Stormfang asked, leaning closer. Why did she want to know? But she saw genuine curiosity in her eyes and guessed she was just as curious about her as she was of them.

Rainstone also twitched her ears at the odd accent they used. It was bright and lilting, like a stone skidding on the top of the river, while hers was more... vibrant, almost echoing around the air for a heartbeat as she rolled the words off her tongue.

"Oh, around, east of here mostly," Rainstone mewed, not ready to say she was from the mountains.

"Have you been to the mountains?" she almost choked as Sweetberry asked the question.

"Once before," she mewed tersely.

"What were they like?" now Flickertail was joining in and Rainstone was feeling overwhelmed by the attention.

"Tall, cold, stony, dangerous... and unbelievable..." Rainstone sighed as she imagined her home. She felt a tug in her heart, but her paws didn't twitch. She would never return to the mountains, she knew she couldn't even if she wanted to.

"Did you like them?" Stormfang asked, obviously puzzled by the change of her tone from sharp to wistful.

"Depends on when you had asked me," Rainstone retorted, feeling wary again. Suddenly she realized something. "Do you know how to fight?" she asked all three of them.

Sweetberry and Stormfang shared an almost insulted glance and Flickertail twitched his whiskers wryly. "Stormfang and I know how to fight, Flickertail treats sickness and injuries with herbs," Sweetberry answered.

"But Flickertail's a tom!" Rainstone burst out, eyes wide in astonishment and disbelief that stretched to the ends of her whiskers. Though she knew it must be true, the two she-cats had tackled her with ease, not taking one hit from her flailing paws, and Flickertail smelled of herbs and had been the one to treat her.

Every cat looked at her weirdly. "So, what of it?" Sweetberry asked, looking annoyed.

Rainstone shuffled her paws, she didn't know how they did things, but it was obviously different. "Where I'm from, she-cats know all about herbs, and the toms hunt and fight," she mewed with a frown.

The cats shared a glance, "Well, in the Clans, any cat can be a warrior or a medicine-cat, provided there is an open spot for them," Flickertail mewed.

Rainstone twitched her ears, but said nothing more. She hadn't even said anything about the injustices done, and they were already looking at her warily. "That must be nice," she murmured, too embarrassed to ask about the 'Clans,' or 'warriors,' or even where she was.

Flickertail sensed this and sent the two cats away and she lay down too sleep, Flickertail licking her scratches clean, ignoring his own blood-crusted ear. *It feels nice to be looked after...* Then she fell into a dreamless sleep.

...

When she awoke again, her muddy fur had been cleaned and the poultice on the back of her head replaced. And now the fiery orange light of dusk was filtering into the den along with long, cool shadows.

As well as that, three cats stood in front of her. One was Flickertail; the other had the scent of Sunstar, the cat who had argued with Flickertail earlier. The last one was a stranger to her, but she noticed that all three carried a common scent that overlaid their individual ones, like they were all a family. Like the different scents carried by the hunters and fighters from her home.

"Hello, Rainstone, I am glad to see you are awake and well," Sunstar mewed, stepping forward. He was a large, dark yellow tom, even bigger than Night. And his eyes were dark amber and mixed with brown. Like the cats she'd seen earlier, he was quite... plump looking. Not fat, for she could see his muscles, but well rounded.

The she-cat that stood behind him nodded at her, she was slighter looking but was still much larger, or taller, than the she-cats back in the cave. She also didn't have quite the slender curve that the she-cats in the cave had inherited and distinguished them from toms.

"I thank you for your kindness," Rainstone mewed formally, though her tail twitched with irritableness. She still would have rather died then been forced to drag out her life another day. But she knew she could never kill herself on purpose, her kits had died for her, it'd be wrong to tear away that gift they'd given for her.

Sunstar looked slightly surprised by her formality, but dipped his head again. "As you are now well again, I will have to ask you to leave tomorrow morning, my cats aren't too fond of you after scratching Flickertail here, and would like you gone," Sunstar carried on, almost apologetically.

"Of course," Rainstone mewed tautly. "I'll leave now, if you please," she mewed, standing up. Her legs felt shaky all the way down to her toes and her head swam with colors from lack of nourishment and she realized she hadn't eaten since that long ago evening before she'd heard the tom-kit being attacked by a fox.

But she refused to show weakness and limped past them heavily, her dead paw feeling unstable and weaker than usual. "Wait," now Sunstar was in front of her again, blocking her way and eyes trained on her dead paw. "What happened to your paw?"

Rainstone opened her mouth to respond, but Flickertail beat her too it. "See! She's not well enough to travel, she'll be dead in two sun-rises if she can't even walk properly," Flickertail mewed.

Rainstone jerked her head around to glare at the medicine-cat, ready to retort she could manage just fine, but she met the look in his eyes and knew he just wanted her to stay until she was better. *If*

that's the case, I'll be here forever, she thought wryly.

"Very well," Sunstar agreed with a heavy sigh, "She may stay until her paw heals, but no longer," Sunstar mewed, with a sharp jerk of his head toward the she-cat.

"Until then, Mintbreeze, please make sure our guest is fed," Sunstar mewed, than he padded out of the den.

By now the orange light had faded to a few gleaming red rays that shed dusty pink light on the muddy ground. Mintbreeze left and then returned in the time Rainstone limped back to her nest, and she dropped a small fish in front of her paws.

Rainstone wrinkled her nose at the rotting smell, and guessed she'd been given the worst fresh-kill there was, but she accepted it was a twitch of her ears. Mintbreeze didn't leave, but went to chat with Flickertail on the other side of the den.

Rainstone took a bite of the fish; it was slimy on top and muddy on one side, but the meat with clean and mouth-watering good. The fresh, water taste filled her mind with images of clear mountain pools and flashes of silver scales.

When she was finishing, she studied the she-cat. She held an air of dignified importance, but didn't quite seem to have the authority of Sunstar. She was obviously behind him, maybe his mate? The she-cat, though not as slender or pretty as the mountain cats, did have a pretty look.

She had pale silver fur with three smoky gray stripes running down her body, one down her spine, and the other two smaller and about a whisker's length away from the main stripe, one down each side. She also had pale green eyes, like a faded green leaf in the warm season.

When Rainstone had finished cleaning her fur from the fish, Mintbreeze returned to her. "I hope you appreciate what we are doing for you, the other Clans would have left you to die or driven you away," she mewed reproachfully.

Rainstone shrugged and rolled on her back, "Too bad I ended up in your Clan, whatever that is," she muttered, staring up defiantly at Mintbreeze. The she-cat looked a little taken back, and Rainstone wondered if she'd expected her to act as courteous to her as to Sunstar. *Why? She's not a tom; I can treat her however I like.*

Although she again got the feeling that these cats didn't divide themselves like the mountain cats. After all, if she-cats could fight, why wouldn't they be treated the same? *But they still have a tom leader*, she reminded herself, *they must just be more respectful*, she concluded.

But she felt that this world knew nothing of what she'd come from; this new world was completely ignorant to what was going on. She stared at Flickertail as he paced the den, tail lashing in agitation. "What's wrong?" she asked, head propped up on her front paws, tail flicking rhythmically behind her.

Flickertail glanced at her, and then gazed at the moon which could just be glimpsed. "I can feel it tugging me," he murmured. "Not that I'd expect you to understand," he added, though not unkindly.

Rainstone stared at him questioningly, did he feel the same pull at his paws as she felt tugging at her belly, to sit and stare at the moon? She remembered something he'd said that morning, *ancestors*.

She decided to test him. "Come on, I want to see the night sky," she murmured, getting up from her nest and limping out of the entrance. The first thing she saw as she emerged was a pair of glowing blue eyes and bristling fur that was bleached silver in the moonlight. The cat, whoever it was, smoothed its fur as Flickertail emerged behind her and nodded at the cat.

"That's Webclaw, he's sitting guard right now while the Clan sleeps," Flickertail explained.

Rainstone's ears pricked, she could hear the hum of many cats sleeping, though not quite as many as back in the cave. "How many cats live here?" she asked curiously.

"Not as many as usual," Flickertail mewed heavily, sitting down and inviting her to sit down next to him, which she accepted to do. "We lost many cats from sickness in leaf-bare," Flickertail mewed with a sigh.

"Leaf-bare?" she echoed in confusion.

"When it's cold and there's snow and ice," Flickertail explained.

Rainstone nodded, "Sickness is strong when cats become weak," she mewed, remembering her own few days of sickness.

"You said you learned herbs, who taught you?" Flickertail asked curiously. Rainstone ignored him, staring intently at the stars, they seemed further away here than in the mountains, and it wringed her heart.

"Some cat told me those stars are our ancestors," Rainstone murmured, eyes fixed on a bright star.

Flickertail stiffened next to her, but she couldn't tear her gaze away to look at him. "Y-Yes, in the Clans, our ancestors, StarClan, are where all good cats go when they die. I always feel closer to Silverpelt when I'm at the Moonpool," Flickertail sighed under his breath, and Rainstone felt he had not intended her to hear.

But his words intrigued her, 'Silverpelt,' and 'Moonpool,' they sounded important and rang in her head. "Where did you hear of ancestors? As far as I knew, rogues didn't know about ancestors," Flickertail continued.

Rainstone turned to look at him finally, "I told you before, I'm not a rogue," she mewed.

"Then where did you come from? Are you from the Tribe?" Flickertail mewed, leaning forward.

Rainstone frowned, "Tribe? What's that? I thought you were Clans," she mewed. *Sheesh! How many groups of cats are there?*

"The Tribe of Rushing Water is a group of cats who live in the mountains," Flickertail mewed, sounding slightly disappointed.

"They honor their ancestors much like the Clans and have their own systems for hunting and fighting," Flickertail continued.

Rainstone shrugged, if they honored their ancestors, they definitely weren't her cats. "Never seen them, I lived in the mountains far north of here, in a nice green valley," she mewed firmly.

"Oh," Flickertail sighed.

Rainstone looked at him again, for the first time that day; her kits were at the back of her mind. "What are the Clans like?" she asked.

Flickertail looked at her with a little smirk, "I'll tell you all about the Clans if you tell me about where you're from and what you've seen," he mewed.

Rainstone fell silent for a moment, considering his words. "Do you really want to know where I'm from and what I've seen?" she asked hesitantly. She could sense he was a good cat, she doubted he'd be happy about the horrors she'd endured.

Learning that my father wanted me dead was hard enough for me, and I was expecting it! But Flickertail didn't hesitate as he nodded vigorously. "Yes, I want to know what goes on outside the Clans!" Flickertail mewed, eyes bright. "And don't worry, I've seen some pretty bad stuff, I doubt anything you say could shock me," Flickertail mewed.

Rainstone snorted, she didn't like to scare cats with her story, but she couldn't ignore a challenge. "Fine, I'll tell you all about it... and if I do shock you, you've got to give me... a lump of honey," she mewed, guessing he had some in his medicine store.

Flickertail seemed to weigh the gamble, than nodded. "Okay, you've got yourself a deal. So, tell me all about your world..." he mewed with a purr.

Rainstone forced a purr back, but her eyes were fixed on the moon as she began. "I'll tell you, but you've got to tell me about this new world I'm in before I could possibly tell you about my old world," she mewed.

Flickertail snorted in impatience, "You never give in, do you? Fine, first of all, we are in RiverClan, the greatest of all the Clans..."

Chapter 23: Out and Back Again

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"And that is why Clan cats don't play with their food," Flickertail finished.

Rainstone stared at him with drooped eyes and mouth open in boredom. "Because an owl will come and take it away?" she asked dubiously.

"Yes," Flickertail mewed with a nod of his head.

"Is that the last rule?" Rainstone asked.

"Well, I've told you all about the warrior-code, but there are other rules," Flickertail mewed with a frown.

"Oh, great," Rainstone yawned. Flickertail had been telling her all about the warrior-code and the beginning of the Clans, as well as telling a long, somewhat riveting story of the journey of the Clans from one home to another.

"You see, there are exceptions to the rules, mainly; that any cat can cross other territories to visit the Moonpool and to go to the gathering island on the full moon. Also, cats can cross the lake by staying within two tail-lengths of the water if they need help or need to exchange news," Flickertail mewed.

"Is that it?" Rainstone asked.

"Also, a warrior may challenge his leader if the leader is weak or cruel," Flickertail mewed. "And there are additional rules."

Rainstone groaned. At first, she'd been very impressed by the complex organization, and that there was nothing to divide toms and she-cats. But now, the rules seemed heavy and numerous.

"Medicine-cats cannot have mates or kits, kits must stay in camp until they are six moons old and cannot hunt. The safety of the Clan is more important than an individual cat. Also, Clans cannot drive another Clan from their territory, cannot force them to share hunting grounds, and cannot attack special patrols agreed upon by all four Clans," Flickertail mewed.

"Does that really happen very often?" Rainstone asked.

"What?" Flcikertail stopped and turned toward to her from where he was sorting herbs.

"Special patrols! It seems that the Clans are pretty separate, only working together when their very survival is at stake. But really, how many threats can really destroy so many cats?" Rainstone asked, slightly annoyed.

"More than you might think. There was once a Great Battle, the Clans were almost destroyed and were very weak, but they survived because they worked together," Flickertail mewed.

"What was this, 'Great Battle,' about?" Rainstone challenged suspiciously.

Flickertail frowned, "I don't really remember, but it was a fight between good and evil, and there were four special cats in the oldest prophecy known to the Clans," Flickertail mewed.

Rainstone shrugged and gestured him to continue. "I think that's it for the special rules... Oh! Except that cats going to the Moonpool can't eat on their journey," Flickertail mewed with a purr.

"Okay," Rainstone mewed with a sigh, "Now, tell me about the other Clans. You've told me where they live, but not their names and how they're different from RiverClan," Rainstone mewed.

"Well, WindClan cats are small, smaller then you mostly, and can run very fast. ShadowClan cats are taller and thinner and half-live by night. ThunderClan can hide and track well in thick undergrowth and are more broad-shouldered and flat headed," Flickertail mewed.

Rainstone made a face, "Ugh! Who'd want to live in a forest? I'd turn into a mushroom from being in the shadows all the time!" she complained.

Flickertail purred, "That's what I think as well!"

"So," Rainstone continued, "What makes RiverClan special?" she asked.

"Oh, we can swim," Flickertail mewed proudly.

"Really?" Rainstone mewed, fearful and curious at the thought of swimming.

"Yep! And we're larger than the other Clans and have sleek pelts," Flickertail mewed, shaking out his own waxy pelt. Rainstone looked at her fur; it wasn't waxy, but seemed to have a sheet of silkiness. "It's from eating fish," Flickertail explained.

Rainstone nodded, "Is that it?" she asked, nervous about telling of her roots.

Flickertail nodded, turning to look at her, "Now, tell me all about your home," he mewed.

"After I eat and rest, I've been awake all night, same as you," she added as she noticed Flickertail's tired expression.

Flickertail nodded, "Okay, I'll go get us something to eat, then we can take a nap," he yawned.

Rainstone nodded, shifting in her nest as she waited. She glanced up as paw-steps pattered down the slope and she looked up, expecting to see Flickertail, but her ears pricked in surprise as she saw three young cats.

They seemed no more than two moons old and the sight of the kits sent a wave of pain rolling over her and her eyes clouded with grief for a moment. The leader of the kits was a soft black she-kit was shimmering fur and soft gray eyes.

The kit raced up to her, low to the ground. The two other kits, a

brown and white tom with one white ear and one brown ear and laughing blue eyes, and a silver tom with white paws and green eyes; followed who was obviously their sister.

"Die intruder!" the black kit squealed, jumping at Rainstone's upward facing flank. Rainstone tensed for a moment, but then realized the kit's paws were sheathed. Her two littermates were taking turns batting at Rainstone's paws and tail with soft paws and squeals of excitement.

"Oh no! You've killed me!" Rainstone gasped in mock pain, rolling over on her back. "Goodbye cruel world," she whispered with a smirk on her face. Then she held her breath, making her flanks stop rising and falling.

The kits stopped moving and whispered in worried voices. Meanwhile, Rainstone was having a hard time holding her breath and was ready to gasp for air when the little silver tom padded over to her half-opened eyes and stared down at her.

"Are you okay?" he whimpered.

Rainstone blew out the breath she was holding and drew in a few gulps of air. "I think I'll survive," she purred.

The gray tom purred, "I like you!" he proclaimed.

"Carpkit! Stay away from that nasty rogue!" The sharp voice came from a brown she-cat with orange tabby markings and blue eyes. The scent of the kits matched her and the sweet scent of milk flowed from her. Rainstone supposed she was the mother.

"Why?" the brown and white tom kit asked, blue eyes bright.

"Because she's dangerous," the queen growled, glaring sharply at Rainstone, who returned the gaze steadily.

"But she didn't hurt us!' the black she-kit complained, clambering over Rainstone's back leg.

"Flashkit, when I tell you to do something, you do it without question," the queen mewed severely.

"Doesn't sound too smart to me, asking questions are how cats become smarter," Rainstone mewed mildly.

The queen glared at her again, but said nothing as she ushered her kits out. Rainstone sat, swishing her tail until Flickertail returned. "Are you okay?" Flickertail asked.

"What's so bad about rogues? All the rogues I met were polite, if not indifferent, and even helpful," Rainstone mewed, thinking of Flake's family and Hopper.

Flickertail looked stunned by the sudden outburst. "A queen told her kits to stay away from me," Rainstone explained more calmly.

"Aw, Ottertail is a little suspicious," Flickertail mewed and Rainstone supposed he was talking about the queen.

"But it's not just her, is it? Sunstar said most cats wanted me gone," Rainstone carried on fiercely.

"But he allowed you to stay until your paw is better, speaking of which, I'd like to try some comfrey on it," Flickertail murmured.

"Comfrey won't help, it's not sprained or broken, try some nettle and thyme," Rainstone retorted, hoping he had that.

Flickertail looked at her curiously, "Why would that help?"

"Because the paw hasn't felt a thing since it was frozen, just try it and see if it does anything, if it doesn't, then that's it," Rainstone mewed finally.

Flickertail seemed to ponder over her advice. "But Stinging Nettle usually makes a cat sick," he mewed, with his head tilted to one side.

Rainstone scoffed, "I wasn't going to eat it. Put it in a poultice on the paw and then wrap it in cobweb or some large leaf," she mewed.

Flickertail nodded slowly, "What will the nettle do on the paw?" he asked as he mixed up the poultice.

"It can be used with comfrey to heal bones, but I want it on my paw to sooth any inflammation that I can't see, that may be blocking the feeling," Rainstone mewed.

Flickertail glanced at her with an impressed expression. "You really know all about herbs?" he asked.

Rainstone nodded, "I told you, where I'm from, all she-cats learn about herbs. I always hated it," she added in a growl.

"But if you know so much, doesn't that mean you have a gift?" Flickertail asked, carefully applying the herbs.

"Only because I have a good memory, I was never one to forget much. I wish I was," she added in a growl.

Flickertail gave her a curious look, but said nothing as he wrapped the dead paw in cobwebs in which he wrapped in bindweed. "Okay, now you can tell me all about your home," Flickertail mewed eagerly.

"I still haven't eaten. And I'd like some ragweed, if you please," Rainstone mewed, pulling the small fish toward her.

"Ragweed?" Flickertail asked in confusion.

"Yes, it's got ragged-leaves, looks like a small fern," Rainstone mewed, taking a few quick bites from the fish.

"What does this, 'ragweed,' do?" Flickertail asked, pawing at his own fish.

"It gives extra energy or strength," Rainstone mewed, quickly devouring her meal in famished bites.

"I don't think it grows around here... possibly in ThunderClan territory, do you know where it grows best?" Flickertail asked.

Rainstone shrugged, cleaning off the last scraps of fish, enjoying the strong scent. "I found it all the time in the mountains," she mewed.

"Well, we can use burnet for strength down here, it should work just

as well," Flickertail mewed, separating a few herbs before dropping a few leaves in front of Rainstone's paws.

Rainstone wrinkled her nose, "Put some honey on it, please, I can tell it'll taste terrible," she sniffed.

Flickertail rolled his eyes. "How about some heather-nectar? That's easy to find," the medicine-cat mewed, mixing something into the herbs.

Rainstone eyed them doubtfully, but she knew she needed the strength they could give, so she licked them up, trying not to touch her tongue to them very much, though the heather-nectar did taste fairly sweet.

"Now, you can tell me all about your life," Flickertail mewed, settling down with his fish right in front of his paws, eyes fixed on her intently.

Rainstone swallowed uncomfortably. "Okay, well, there's something you need to understand before I tell you. Where I come from... there are no ancestors. No guidance except the rules and the rules are definitely wrong..."

Rainstone recounted her life, how she'd been given to a tom at two moons, all the special rules and the story behind the rules, her experiences with toms and the daily life. She skipped around the mating rules; she felt that it was wrong to tell him of that. She also conveniently forgot Scamp and her dreams.

"Then, Pepper, Night, and Sun worked to get me out of the mountains and as I was escaping in a blizzard I walked in a stream to get rid of my trail, and my paw froze," Rainstone finished her story of the mountains. Then she gave a brief story of the rogues she'd encountered and her journey here.

Flickertail was staring at her with eyes wide and mouth agape and Rainstone shifted in her nest. "I can't imagine such a life," Flickertail mumbled at last, dropping his eyes to his untouched meal.

"But there are a few things you didn't explain. How do you know

about ancestors in the stars? And why did you say, when you mated with Night to have kits that you had to try harder than the times before?" Flickertail asked, ducking his head in embarrassment.

"I...uh, heard about the ancestors in the stars from Hopper," Rainstone mewed, remembering the rogue telling her what she already knew. No matter what, she wasn't going to tell him about her dreams. They were special and for her alone.

"And... um, the toms can decide when to mate as long as the she-cat is six moons old," she mewed awkwardly, wincing as Flickertail stared at her in horror.

"You mean, they're forced to mate?" Flickertail mewed hoarsely.

"Yes, I did warn you about such things though," Rainstone added more briskly.

"B-but, how can such evil exist?! Rainstone, we have to go back and change things!" Flickertail mewed, jumping to his paws.

Rainstone shook her head, "No, not even if your whole Clan helped could we change things," she mewed

Flickertail stared at her, "Are you willing to let innocent cats suffer?" he asked in a growl.

Rainstone waved her tail, "For most of them, they're content. Life is well enough if they follow the rules. They don't know freedom like Clan cats do, they'll survive for a while longer," Rainstone mewed, though her heart wrenched at the thought of Half being forced to do such things.

"Besides, I told you, Night and Sun will change things when they are leaders," Rainstone mewed.

"But only if your father didn't have another son," Flickertail mewed.

"No, he'll have two daughters," Rainstone mewed firmly. "I could tell from the way Droplet was carrying," Rainstone mewed, although she knew it was a lie. Droplet was going to have at least one more son, but with any luck, the tom would be like Pepper.

"Not to mention it's too far to travel there, I doubt I could find my way back," Rainstone added.

Flickertail sighed and kneaded the drying ground with his paws. "When I think of all those cats, forced to live in such a despicable way, it just makes me feel so lucky to have been born into the Clans," Flickertail mewed.

Rainstone sighed and closed her mind against the images that had swelled up in the emotion of the story. She wanted to put her past behind her, but not so far behind her that she couldn't remember it. Couldn't remember Sun's eyes bright with mischief... Night's gaze so longing... Pepper's gaze so loving.

She glanced up as Flickertail nudged an oak leaf with a clump of sticky honeycomb on it in front of her. "I think you won the bet," he mewed with a twitch of his ears and a small scowl.

Rainstone smirked back, than dug into the warm, soothing honey as Flickertail left to collect herbs. She curled up for a nap once she was full of the delicious warm honey.

...

"What did you do?!" the angry growl woke Rainstone abruptly from her sleep and she lifted her head sleepily and yawned. "Worthless rogue!" another cat hissed and paws clawed at her fur and swung her through the air, throwing her right out of the den.

She hit the ground with a loud thump, trying to figure out the situation. Two cats had attacked her and she rolled out of the way and jumped to her paws as one of the cats pounced.

She madly struggled to place the shapes and colors to her panicking mind, focusing on her two attackers and the surrounding territory. One was a dark brown tom with lighter brown paws and underbelly and outraged green eyes.

The tom raced for her and lashed out at her muzzle with lighting fast paws. But Rainstone had trained with Pepper who'd been much faster in his charge and she jerked her head out of range before he

lashed out.

The other attacker, a more slender black she-cat with dark green eyes growled and leaped, trying to land on her back. Remembering Pepper doing the same thing, once upon a time, Rainstone rolled on her back and kicked the she-cat's belly at the right moment.

The tom was charging her again and Rainstone dodged, slipping her injured paw to the side and swinging around on it, the cobwebs making the turn much slicker. Then she tripped him and he went face-down in the dirt, a trickle of blood coming from his mouth where he must have bitten his tongue.

Then the black she-cat jumped at her again. Rainstone, using her smaller body to her advantage twisted around so she was behind her. Then, as she the-cat slid on her haunches to turn around, Rainstone wrapped her paws around her neck and pulled her to the ground, holding her there in a tight enough grip that she wouldn't move, but not tight enough to stop her breathing.

"STOP!" the roaring voice made Rainstone jerk away from the she-cat and she stared into the furious orange slits of Sunstar. His fur was fluffed up on his shoulders, making him look much bigger.

The leader stalked over to her and thrust his muzzle in her face. "Get out of my camp, now! I will not tolerate any cat that attacks my warriors!"

"But they-"

"NOW!" Sunstar yowled, breaking off her protest.

"Fine," Rainstone mewed coldly, she whipped around and turned toward the log by which she'd seen Flickertail leave by. She climbed up on it, her dead paw shakily trying to hold its position on the slippery wood. She could feel the stares of several cats burning into her fur.

She felt too angry to even pay any attention to them; she'd just been defending herself! But Sunstar hadn't even let her try to explain. Why had those two warriors attacked her anyways? For the first

time she realized she'd never cleaned the honey from her whiskers, and the honey-splattered leaf had been right in front of her...

I knew that bet was somehow going to bring me trouble... They're all fools anyways... She headed at a direction at random, skipping over little brooks and streams.

Eventually she came to a long stretch of stinking, black rock. She crinkled her nose at the rotten stench and turned up the rock, not wanting to touch one paw to it. Before long, she realized the scent of RiverClan had faded and she shivered to be on her own again.

What did she do now? She had no kits to care for, no home to go to. *Maybe I can try to join one of the other Clans?* The thought didn't appeal much to her, from what Flickertail had told her.

ShadowClan lived in a dark forest, and she'd hated travelling through the evergreen forest. She couldn't imagine being trapped in undergrowth all the time as it was supposedly in ThunderClan territory. And she really didn't want to live on an exposed land with no cover all the time.

She sighed, RiverClan had been perfect, and she'd missed her chance through hardly any fault of her own. She trudged forward, her paw-steps were steady, having regained lots of strength from her meals and naps. Not to mention the burnet that seemed to have strengthened her.

But she could still feel weakness edging up along her as she continued padding forward. She had turned away from the black rock and had been almost unknowingly been following the RiverClan scent line from a distance of a few eagle-lengths.

She halted and pricked her ears as she heard a thin, wailing cry. She turned her paws and started racing toward the sound. What was happening? The cat that was in trouble was just inside RiverClan territory.

Rainstone raced over the scent-line as the wailing grew mixed with growls and the scent of blood touched the air. Rainstone skidded over a curve, her paws spitting up mud as she looked across a

narrow brook lined with wide rocks.

Two cats wrestled together on the ground, a pile of freshly-caught fish lay nearby. Rainstone silently raced and jumped over the brook, landing on a flat rock. The fighter with RiverClan scent was a young gray tabby with black ear-tips and green eyes, about a moon younger than Rainstone and not much bigger.

The other was a black tom with gray paws and dull brown eyes, he smelled of the black rock and faintly of fox, battle-scarred and with an angry, hungry look in his eyes.

Rainstone flattened her ears and with a quick bounce and paw slice, the two cats jerked away from each other. "What are you two fighting about?" Rainstone asked innocently.

"This cat here, was stealing my prey," the gray she-cat hissed. "And you're trespassing, are you a friend of his?" she hissed.

"Hardly," Rainstone answered irritably.

The black tom scoffed, "I don't know you."

"Oh, but I think I know you, mind telling me your name so I can jiggle my memory?" she asked quietly, knowing he wouldn't answer if she asked directly.

"It's Nightwing," the black tom mewed proudly, glaring at the she-cat daringly.

The she-cat gasped, "You were ShadowClan's deputy before you tried to murder a Clan-mate!"

Rainstone stiffened and turned toward him. "You're right, I don't know you, but I know I don't like you," she growled.

"Mind your own business, rogue," Nightwing snarled, snowing his teeth.

"Old habits are hard to break," Rainstone growled, leaping for the tom. She caught him and wrenched his head back before he could scramble away.

Rainstone snarled as the tom sliced her muzzle. She retaliated with a flashing blow to his leg. She knew that a cat with no leg power was easier to defeat. And with a few stinging blows to his haunches, the tom backed off with a snarl.

"Watch your back, kitty, I always have my revenge," Nightwing snarled.

"Afraid that you will have to wait in line," Rainstone retorted boldly.

"I'll make you wish you were never born," Nightwing snarled, struggling to scare her.

"Too late, about thirteen moons to late," Rainstone growled. "Now get lost," she spat, kicking a stone at him.

The tom snarled and leaped away, disappearing in a few moments. Rainstone turned to the gray she-cat. "I could have defeated him without your help," the she-cat muttered.

"Of course, I just felt it better to intervene before you got so badly injured that you wouldn't make it to camp," Rainstone responded smoothly.

The she-cat muttered something inaudibly, "You only defeated him so easily because I had weakened him," the gray cat continued.

"I know," Rainstone responded.

"And you had better watch your back, Nightwing was accused of killing his own brother and trying to murder his leader," the gray cat cautioned.

"It seems he wants revenge on the Clans. And I won't be hanging around here too much longer," Rainstone responded nonchalantly, eyeing the gray she-cat's deep, bleeding scratches. "Just wait a moment," she mewed, darting off for a moment.

She came back with cobwebs and marigold. "Wish I had some tormentil, but this'll have to do for now," Rainstone muttered, applying it to the she-cat's worst wounds. "There, that'll keep you in

one piece for a while."

"How do you know about herbs?" the gray she-cat asked curiously.

"I was taught," she answered curtly.

"Are you from the Clans?" the gray she-cat asked.

"No, though I've been staying with your Clan for a few days," she added, looking up from her work to stare in the she-cat's eyes.

The gray she-cat gasped, "You are the rogue?" she asked.

Rainstone nodded, "Sunstar ordered me gone after I defended myself from two warriors who attacked me. The fool didn't even give me a chance to explain," Rainstone muttered too low for the gray she-cat to hear the insult to her leader.

"My name is Willowwater," the she-cat mewed as Rainstone stepped back.

"Rainstone," she answered shortly.

"Do you want to come back to camp? I'm sure Sunstar won't mind after you helped me," Willowwater mewed.

"Okay, I didn't know where I'd spend the night anyways, it'd be nice to have a chance to make some sort of a plan," Rainstone admitted.

"Great, would you mind helping me carry the fish back?" Willowwater asked.

"Uh, sure," Rainstone mewed, grabbing delicately the fish by the tail fins. Willowwater grabbed the rest and led her on a faint trail through the grass.

"Oh, just one thing," the she-cat turned toward her as they neared the camp. "You didn't save me, you just finished the fight before I could," the she-cat mewed stubbornly.

Rainstone rolled her eyes, "Whatever you say," she muttered. "I'm just the poor, lame rogue who stumbled upon your plight," she

mewed.

Willowwater snorted, whiskers twitching in mild amusement. Then she led her into camp. "Willowwater! What happened to you?" cats started encircling the wounded she-cat. Rainstone hung behind, shifting her paws.

Cats started noticing her and gave her unreadable looks. To her, it seemed like they were half-ashamed, half-disappointed. "Rainstone!" Flickertail called her name, turning from examining Willowwater to look at her in relief.

"I heard what happened, how Antfoot and Creekshade attacked you because they thought you had stolen my honey. How you defended yourself and Sunstar sent you away without letting you explain," Flickertail burst out, giving his leader a quick glare.

"Oh, uh, it's okay," Rainstone muttered.

"What happened to your muzzle? Did you get in a fight with Willowwater?" Flickertail looked scared of the possibility and cats started growling and yowling at her.

"No, she didn't," Willowwater responded. "I was fighting with a trespasser and Rainstone came along at the end and helped me send him away," Willowwater responded. "If I had fought her, she would have been covered with scratches," the gray cat added rudely.

"More like I wouldn't have been injured at all," Rainstone growled.

"Well, both of you come to the medicine-cat den. We can discuss more in the morning after we've rested," Flickertail mewed with a quick glance at Sunstar who nodded his assent. Though Rainstone noticed that a cat followed them and stood guard outside the den now.

Flickertail took care of the rest of Willowwater's scratches and fixed one of the ones that had grown messy on the way back. Then he turned toward her scratches given from his Clan-mates and the cut from the rogue Clan cat. She had to argue with him to apply bloom instead of marigold to her wounds though.

She claimed bloom was tenderer with face injuries. Then they lay down, exhausted and not even remembering to eat something as the faint glow of night entered the den. "It's been a long day for you, Rainstone," Flickertail murmured.

"Why's that?" Rainstone murmured, half-asleep.

"Because you've been gone and back twice today." But Rainstone was too tired to figure out what he meant.

Chapter 24: Adapting

Chapter 24: Adapting

The next morning, Rainstone was called to Sunstar's den along with Flickertail, Willowwater, Creekshade, and Antfoot. Sunstar's den was a den behind a hollowed out boulder that had an ivy curtain, just like the cave in the mountains.

It had a sandy floor and chinks in the worn-out rock allowed light in, dappling the ground. It was comfortably large enough for four cats to sit, but the six cats were squished as they pressed into the den.

"Now, I want to hear what happened yesterday when Rainstone, you attacked Creekshade and Antfoot," Sunstar began, turning a steady gaze on her.

Rainstone looked back levelly, "First off, I didn't attack them; I defended myself after they attacked me. It would have been crazy for me to have attacked to cats while surrounded by their friends and family," Rainstone added sharply, annoyed any cat could have believed such a scenario.

"Why did they attack you? Do you know?" Sunstar asked.

"You already know that, Flickertail explained to you," Rainstone responded stubbornly, she knew he was trying to trick her into revealing some hidden motive.

Sunstar narrowed his eyes and nodded, "They thought you'd stolen Flickertail's honey while he was out, Flickertail says he gave it to you. Now why did he do that?" Sunstar really sounded like he didn't know why.

"Because I won a little gamble," Rainstone responded, wondering why every cat was here if he was just questioning her.

"What gamble?" Sunstar asked.

Rainstone narrowed her eyes slightly, "He said nothing about my past would shock him. He was wrong," Rainstone mewed.

"And what about your past shocked him?" Sunstar sounded very curious now.

Rainstone recoiled and leaned back, setting her face into a hard expression. "Doesn't matter," she muttered, licking her shoulder fur to keep from looking at the cats who were staring at her. She was sitting at the end of the line of cats, so her shoulder was pressed up against the rock.

"Fine, Willowwater tells me you helped her by sending the other rogue away and helping her back to camp. So I will allow you to stay in the camp for another half-moon," Sunstar announced.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'd prefer to be gone in three days," Rainstone mewed curtly.

Every cat looked at her. "Why?" Sunstar asked.

"That rogue I encountered with Willowwater, he said he always has his revenge, and seeing as he wants vengeance or something on the Clans, I'd prefer to be moving on," Rainstone mewed. That and the fact she preferred not to be around cats that hated her. She'd lived like that too long.

"Who was it?" Sunstar asked, shooting a questioning glance at Willowwater.

The young gray she-cat stared at her leader, "It was Nightwing," Willowwater mewed quietly.

Instantly, Sunstar's fur had fluffed up on his neck and his eyes were shooting rage and fear. "You all need to leave, I must speak to my senior warriors," Sunstar mewed.

The cats left quickly and Rainstone sat down at the edge of camp as the cats headed to their friends. She felt as left out ever. She thought of her own friends, of her family, far away in a remote

cave. Then of her kits, buried beneath a weeping willow.

"Hey! Do you want to come meet some cats?" Rainstone glanced up at Willowwater, the she-cat's green eyes were mildly friendly but uninterested, as if she didn't really care if she came or not.

"Sure, why not," Rainstone muttered, padding forward, her dead paw almost as steady as her other paws. Willowwater led her to a bramble den that was surrounded by reeds, a trail of which had been trampled down.

"Hey guys! I want you to meet someone!" Willowwater called.

"But we've been training all day!" a tired, complaining mew came from the dark den.

"Well, she's leaving soon, so this is your only chance!" Willowwater snapped back, tail flicking in impatience.

A wait of silence, then, "Okay, we're coming." Out of the den emerged three half-grown cats. In the lead was a pale brown tom with sandy tabby stripes and gray eyes. Next, a sand-gold she-cat with aqua eyes and a long tail. Her body shape so closely resembled the tom's that Rainstone guessed they were littermates, or at least kin.

The third was an elegant, fluffy white she-cat with silver-blue patches and yellow eyes. She reminded Rainstone of Crystal in the way she held herself and the way her eyes were bright and lively, though with a suspicious tint that Crystal hadn't shared.

"Rainstone, this is Pikepaw, Dawnpaw, and Cloudypaw. RiverClan's apprentices," Willowwater introduced, pointing to each apprentice in turn.

Rainstone dipped her head in greeting toward the young cats who stared at her with wariness and curiosity. Rainstone didn't like how they studied her as if she were some strange bug and she grew impatient after a few moments.

"Won't miss you when I leave," she mewed abruptly, turning away

after a stretch of awkward silence.

"Hey, Rainstone!" Willowwater mewed in annoyance, darting in front of her to block her with her taller body. "You could at least try to be nice," the warrior mewed.

"I don't play nice, that's why I'm here," Rainstone hissed in frustration, wishing desperately for one moment to be back home.

"That doesn't even make any sense!" Willowwater mewed in exasperation.

"It doesn't have too, it makes sense for me," Rainstone snapped.

"Just come back, the Clan is watching," Willowwater mewed in a lower tone.

Rainstone had already noticed, but she didn't care, she was going to leave after all. "Fine, I'll play nice for a little while," Rainstone growled, mostly because she had nothing else to do.

She followed Willowwater back to the three young cats that were looking at her on annoyance. *I'm not very happy to meet you either*.

"I meant to say, I'll miss not being able to know you. Not," she added that under her breath.

Cloudypaw looked at Willowwater, "Do we have to talk to her. It's not like she could teach us anything," Cloudypaw mewed.

Rainstone glared at her, "It's more like you who are wasting my time," she growled.

"Well then, enlighten us," Dawnpaw mewed, waving her long tail in exaggeration.

"No," Rainstone replied stubbornly while Willowwater let out a sigh of defeat.

"What?! Why not!" Pikepaw jumped to his paws, glaring at her.

"You're too young," Rainstone growled, leaning in to snarl in

Pikepaw's indignant face.

"So what? You can hardly be much older! I doubt if you're more than a moon older then Willowwater," Cloudypaw challenged.

"You're right; I'm only fourteen moons old. But I lost all my youth at two moons from what I've had to do. Trust me, you don't want to know," Rainstone growled.

"Two moons! You couldn't have left your mother at that age!" Cloudypaw growled, obviously not believing her.

"That's right!" Rainstone snarled, her misery and anger shown in those two words. The three apprentices were silenced, realizing she wasn't making anything up.

"Y-you have milk scent on you, where are your kits?" Dawnpaw asked nervously, as if trying to change the subject.

Rainstone just glared at her as a fresh wave of guilt and misery swept over her. "Are you trying to make me feel awful?" she questioned.

"N-no" Dawnpaw almost whimpered, huddling against her brother.

"Then don't ask me about my past, ever," Rainstone growled in a low tone.

"It couldn't have all been bad," Willowwater's cool voice broke through the heat flooding through Rainstone.

Rainstone let out a snort, "You'd be surprised," she muttered, turning her head away.

"Anyways, where are you going to go when you leave?" Willowwater asked.

Rainstone shrugged, though she relaxed as the subject was changed. "I'll travel around... I'd had it all planned out a moon ago... Plans don't ever seem to work," she sighed.

"Well, why don't you ask Sunstar if you can stay?" the words uttered

by Willowwater made Rainstone's eyes go wide in shock.

"For two reasons," Rainstone's voice was shrill in her attempt to cover her surprise. "First, that rogue seems to want me dead, I'd rather stay alive. Second, a blind kit could see this Clan doesn't want me here," Rainstone mewed, her voice lowering.

Willowwater stared at her with a cocked head, "The Clan would accept you, and being in a Clan would protect you," the warrior encouraged.

"Thanks, but no, I don't think I could adapt," Rainstone mewed.

"But you already have, you're completely comfortable with a group of large cats," Willowwater mewed, a hint of confusion.

"That's because I grew up in a group much larger, and that was not what I meant," Rainstone mewed.

"Well, what did you mean?" Willowwater asked, sounding impatient.

"Never mind, I'm going to go rest," Rainstone mewed, feeling suddenly tired. She stood up and padded toward the medicine-cat den. She sighed and let her eyes watch her front paws as she padded forward, *I just could never live with such a great life... not when my kin don't and when my kits died for me...*

...

The next two days passed quickly. Rainstone spent the time figuring where to go, and had decided on heading back to see the tom-kit she'd brought to that twoleg nest just before leading the dog away. She'd also forced herself to learn all the new herbs from Flickertail.

She'd been relieved when he showed her parsley; she'd been uncomfortably full of milk and the relief was tampered with bitterness. She should have had kits to drink her milk, not having to eat frosty herbs to dry it up.

She had also built up her strength through plenty of exercise and ran through her fighting and hunting skills, not wanting to be

caught sloppy by nature.

"Do you really have to leave?" Flickertail asked for the third time that morning. She was getting ready to leave and Sunstar had offered an escort to the border.

"Yes, Flickertail, I really have to go," Rainstone sighed. Didn't he understand she couldn't stay here? She just couldn't adapt to living so well.

"Goodbye, Flickertail," Rainstone mewed, turning toward the red-brown tom whose flicking tail swished through the air rhythmically.

"Goodbye," Flickertail muttered, dropping his amber gaze to the ground.

Rainstone nodded and padded out of the sandy den. She nodded at the two warriors dispatched as her escort, she didn't know either of them and she wasn't going to change that now. She met Sunstar at the newly submerged stepping rocks.

"Rainstone, it has been a pleasure to meet you, I wish you well," Sunstar mewed formally, though Rainstone knew she'd just been an added problem to them recovering from the flood.

"Yes, a quite interesting experience that I don't wish to repeat," Rainstone mewed slowly.

She half expected Sunstar to get angry at the veiled insult, but his orange eyes seemed mildly amused. "If you'd been born a Clan cat, you would have made a great warrior," Sunstar mewed respectively.

"I would have loved the chance, but luck didn't favor me," Rainstone mewed seriously, her voice level.

Sunstar blinked and seemed to ponder over her words before nodding her past with the two escorts. The warriors, a lanky gray tom with silver stripes and an orange tom with blue eyes, led her briskly to the border. The orange tom, who had introduced himself as Cedarheart, was pleasant enough and tried to make small talk to which Rainstone was uncooperative.

At the sloping hillside Rainstone crossed the border with no more than a quick nod at the two warriors who watched her until she crested the slope, not once looking back.

The sun was nearing sun-high and the land stretched before her bare and brown. Green patches showed forests and the mountains loomed misty blue against the clouded sky. The twolegplace was a shimmering wall of artificial light and hard lines. *I don't want to end up there...*

Rainstone yawned and stretched in the warm, dappled light. The cloud patched sky dappled the blue like a giant furry cat. She had been awake most of the night getting ready, and now she had only to find some prey and a place to sleep.

She found a dip under a thorn bush and easily tracked a mouse through the long, dry grass. She quickly ate it and clawed some dry grass together to make a makeshift nest, lowering her weary muscles onto the scratchy fluffiness.

Rainstone dreamed the first dream she'd had since she'd seen Dusty with Song, supposing that was a dream. She was in a grass green meadow, a creek flowing past swiftly and cresting over rocks, sending tiny rainbows jumping over the stream. Butterflies floated nearby and the ground was comfortably soft and cool beneath her paws.

The sun was bright and clear, but not overly hot, just warm enough to touch the aches in her muscles. There was not a cloud in the sky but a playful breeze scurried past, carrying dandelion fluff that seemed to sparkle in whiteness.

"It's so beautiful," Rainstone murmured in awe. In the distance there seemed to rise a forest and on the other side was a hazy mist of darkness, nothing seen beyond a line of mist.

"We are just outside StarClan's territory," the rolling old voice made Rainstone jerk around. She was also aware that she had feeling in her usually dead paw. Song stood, black against the green and amber eyes almost glowing in brightness.

"Song! Why am I here? And where is StarClan?" Rainstone asked, feeling a dozen other questions bubbling at her lips.

But Song held her tail for silence, "You are here because I brought you here, and I am here to tell you one thing. You must go back to the Clans, your destiny lies by the lake," Song mewed.

Mingled emotions of relief and repulse filled her. "I can't live there," Rainstone mewed stubbornly.

"You must, for all the lives lost to help you," Song mewed, her amber eyes taking a hint of sympathy as Rainstone swayed from a rush of guilt. "It was not your fault, they gave it up for you," Song murmured.

Rainstone shook her head despairingly. "My kits didn't choose," she mewed miserably.

"Maybe, but they are waiting for you when it is your time to join them. For now, they will watch you from StarClan's territory, so you must stay there," Song mewed.

Rainstone's ears pricked, "You mean they can see me only from Clan territory?" she questioned. Song blinked slowly but said nothing.

"You must return, there is no life out there for you. There is a life for you in RiverClan," Song repeated.

"But what will I do there?" Rainstone cried.

"You must follow your instincts. There will be tough choices, but follow your heart and you will not go wrong," Song's voice faded. "You need to adapt to this new life given to you." Now her voice was just a whisper as she faded completely from view and Rainstone awoke to the sun nearing the top of the crest she'd passed to exit Clan territory.

"Well," she said to no one, "I guess living in the Clans wouldn't be so bad, providing they accept me."

...

It was dusk by the time Rainstone had caught herself a meal and had climbed the slope overlooking the lake. She took a moment to watch how the setting sun turned the lake into a glowing red-orange reflection that was too bright to look at directly.

Coming down the slope and crossing into RiverClan territory, Rainstone's fur stood on edge. She wasn't sure why, but she felt the need to be as discreet at possible. The feeling grew until Rainstone was skirting RiverClan territory and circling around, tasting the air.

Coming back to the marshy territory, she ducked down behind a clump of reeds and waited. Water soaked her paws and wet her belly fur, but she remained still as she watched. The sunlight faded and the moon rose bright and round, almost a full-moon.

Rainstone crouched lower as a shape appeared on the slope; in the exact place she'd entered Clan territory. The shape was familiarly rugged and the malice gleam in the brown eyes was a look Rainstone had seen far too often in the mountains. A dirty look that sought only to please oneself, whether with power, food, territory, or a mate who served you in all you desired.

Nightwing, the black pelt of the scarred tom gleamed in the moonlight and he seemed to be following a scent trail. Rainstone flattened her ears and followed him, setting her paws down silently on the wet earth.

Nightwing led her to the lake's edge, the water lapped at the shore with a hypnotizing rhythm. Now Rainstone could tell what he was following, the young, milky scent of a kit. It burned rage in her belly that he was going to attack an innocent kit that had strayed too far from camp on a late night adventure.

Rainstone wasn't sure which kit it was, though she thought it was Flashkit, the bolder one of the littermates. Once on the bare shoreline Rainstone had to rely on her dark pelt alone and the few rock outcroppings to stay hidden.

Lucky enough for her, the wind was blowing off the lake so no scents were terribly strong, but Nightwing was following the kit's faint trail with incredible certainty and speed. Rainstone bit her lip

as she kept her body tense, tiptoeing with her dead paw with insanely difficult.

After the looming shape of the twoleg half-bridge over the water had grown very near, a small black shape was on the sandy shore, dabbing at the lapping waves with tired paws, the kit looked worn out.

Nightwing had slowed down as he spotted his quarry. Rainstone slipped onto the grass and circled around the shore, intending to intercept Nightwing and hoping he would go slowly enough for her to get to her spot.

She was hiding in a lush patch of grass and mosses a mere three tail-lengths away from the kit and a shorter length away from Nightwing. She watched cautiously as the black tom stopped and greeted the kit rather pleasantly.

What is he doing? If it had been back in the cave and the kit had been older, Rainstone would have guessed that he wanted to have a little fun. But that did not seem to be the case. Nightwing was flattering the kit for her black fur.

"Black fur is a sign of an excellent stalker and a strong fighter," Nigthwing was mewing, and Flashkit had straightened up with pride.

"Who are you?" the kit asked.

Nightwing hesitated, "I used to live with the Clans, now I live alone. RiverClan was always my favorite Clan," Night wing mewed.

"Were you from RiverClan?" the kit asked.

"No, I lived in ShadowClan, but I always admired the strength and cleverness of RiverClan," Nightwing mewed in a silky soft purr

"Why don't you come join RiverClan?" the kit encouraged.

"Because I was once ShadowClan, I don't think RiverClan would welcome me," Nightwing mewed. *Yeah they wouldn't... but not just for that reason.*

"Oh, well, I better be getting back to camp," the kit mewed, gray eyes looking a little nervous.

"Leaving so soon?" now Nightwing had a hint of menace and his claws uncurled, glinting white in the moonlight. The kit crouched a little fearfully, eyeing the hooked weapons. "You see, I need helpers in my... rebellion. If you came with me you'd be taught to be the best fighter in all the lands, your name would go down in history," Nightwing had gotten closer to the kit with every word and was now muzzle-to-muzzle.

The kit shrank away with a whimper of fear. "I-I want to be a RiverClan warrior!" the kit wailed. Rainstone growled to herself, *stupid tom! She's too young to have thoughts so big, if you were clever, you'd approach a kit about to be apprenticed, a young, impatient cat that had dreams.*

Nightwing glared at the kit, "Too bad," he mewed, eyes cold. He leaned down and grabbed the scruff of the shivering kit. Flashkit let out a wail of terror, silenced as Nightwing slapped it with a paw. "Shut up or I'll hit you harder," Nightwing snarled.

Flashkit wailed again and Nightwing dropped her and raised an unsheathed paw. He never delivered the blow for Rainstone rammed into him and he was skidding on his side to the sandy edge with Rainstone standing protectively in between the tom and the kit.

"You!' Nigthwing snarled.

"Yes me," Rainstone retorted, crouching in ready attack.

"Vengeance will be served tonight," Nigthwing snarled, showing his jagged teeth. He leapt, just a blur of shadow in the night.

Nightwing slammed into her side and she struggled to get a grip on the sand. Nightwing's claws gouged her sides as she flipped over, causing him to tumble away. But he was already on his paws when she had jumped up.

"You have some moves rogue," he spat, "But it won't save you," he

sneered. Rainstone narrowed her eyes when she saw that she was already covered with scratches and he was hardly ruffled. *I need more than just skill...*

When Nightwing leapt again, Rainstone jumped away, purposely kicking up sand as she did so and Nigthwing skidded to a halt in the haze, spluttering and shaking his head as he was choked by sand.

Taking the moment, Rainstone jumped on his back, digging in with her claws. Almost instantly Nightwing was falling sideways. For a split second Rainstone laminated between jumping off or clinging on. It was one second too late and she was squashed, but still digging her claws into the withering pelt.

Claws scraped her shoulders and wacked her ears, but she was mostly safe as Nightwing's paws flailed helplessly. Unfortunately, he was smothering her and she was gasping for breath under his greater weight.

Finally she couldn't take it and she kicked him away, flipping herself to her paws and jumping away from where she'd been, guessing he'd pounced for her. She guessed right and Nigthwing was shaking sand from his muzzle.

"Am I doing better?" Rainstone questioned.

Nightwing looked at her and nodded his approval. "It has been a while since I've had a worthy opponent. Even if you are a rogue," Nigthwing mewed.

Rainstone snarled and leapt for him with lighting energy from the comment, she blocked his blows and dug her teeth into his chest, tearing a jagged wound and barely feeling his claws tearing across her own chest. She flung him on the ground and stood over him, paws planted firmly on his shoulders.

"How many times must I say it? I am not a rogue!" she snarled with such venom Nightwing's eyes shone with admiration for a moment.

"Well, it has been a pleasure to make your acquaintance," Nightwing mewed, blood staining his teeth. In a flash of fur and

claws he was a few tail-lengths away and Rainstone had another wound on her cheek. "May I ask your name?" Nigthwing inquired, so politely that Rainstone could hardly believe he was the same murderous cat he'd been a few moments before.

"Rainstone, remember it well," she growled.

"Oh, I will, but it has grown late and I will be missed soon. We shall have to finish this some other time," Nightwing mewed. Rainstone blinked and he was gone, though the rush of fading paw-steps told her he had headed out of Clan territory.

Rainstone turned to the kit, with the rush of adrenaline gone, her wounds throbbed and she tasted blood on her lip. Scratches covered her ears and flanks and long, jagged tears pulsed with blood across her chest. She stumbled numbly toward the lake, knowing she had to wash herself off before binding her wounds.

The water was icy cold and woke Rainstone from her daze. "Oh great goodness its cold!" she cried, shivering. Once the blood was washed off she worked with shaking paws on binding her wounds tightly with cobwebs, too cold to search for any herbs.

"Come on, Flashkit," she mewed when she had finished, turning to the violently shivering kit who hadn't moved once since the beginning of the fight.

"Your mother will be missing you." They headed toward camp, Flashkit stumbling against Rainstone's legs. Rainstone would have liked to carry her, with her mother instincts still up it hurt not to. But her chest ached with every breath and she knew there would be serious damage if she overdid it.

"Flashkit!" the call sounded to Rainstone's left and she nudged Flashkit in that direction, unable to call out. The calls got louder and after a few moments Flashkit was answering, encouraged by the familiar voices.

"Flashkit!" the worried face of Stormfang broke through the dark and Flashkit let out a cry, running to flop at Stormfang's paws. A few other cats appeared and fussed over the kit as Rainstone held

back.

"R-Rainstone?" the surprised voice of Dawnpaw summoned her and she stepped forward into the moonlight, the silver glow reflecting on her fresh scars.

"I see I found your lost kit," she mewed evenly.

"Y-yes, thank you," Dawnpaw stuttered.

"And I have to join RiverClan." Dead silence met her words until Stormfang signaled her forward.

"Flickertail said you'd be back. Sunstar is expecting you."

Chapter 25: Lessons

Chapter 25: Lessons

By the time they got to camp it was morning. Rainstone reported to Sunstar what had happened and then Flickertail fixed up her wounds. Then came the time to ask to join the Clan.

"You want to do what?!" Sunstar gaped.

Rainstone stared back levelly, despite the irritation itching at her. "Do you doubt I couldn't do it?" she asked.

"Yes, you don't have the... disposition to be a Clan cat, too proud and stubborn," Sunstar mewed.

"I could change, I've had to change a lot already," Rainstone mewed. They were sitting alone in Sunstar's den, much more comfortably than last time, with te golden light dappling on the wounds she'd received for a Clan kit.

"You'd have to work very hard, and you'd have to respect every cat," Sunstar mewed, eyeing her hard.

Rainstone groaned, "Even the idiots?" she asked, feeling less optimistic, but she trusted Song.

"If they are in the Clan, yes. Every cat in the Clan has proved their worth one way or another," Sunstar mewed firmly, allowing to room for discussion.

"Fine," Rainstone muttered. "What else do I have to do?" she asked.

Sunstar eyed her in consideration. "I will make you an apprentice, if you make it to warrior status, you will be a part of the Clan," Sunstar mewed.

Rainstone dipped her head in assent. "Alright, on one condition, I keep my name," she mewed stubbornly.

Sunstar tilted his head to one side, "Okay, it'll remain Rainstone, its close enough to a Clan name anyways. Any particular reason why? If your past is so terrible, it'd seem you'd want a change, right?" Sunstar asked.

"It's still my past, my life, and it wasn't all bad. I had a brother, a mate, a friend, a nephew, my mother, all those were good to me," Rainstone mewed.

"What about your father?" Sunstar asked.

Rainstone's eyes grew hard as bitterness washed through her, "I have no father," she growled.

Sunstar looked surprised, but pressed no further. "I will assign you a mentor, and I'll ask Willowwater to teach you about the Clans," Sunstar mewed.

Rainstone didn't point out that Flickertail had taught her plenty, she'd like to ask Willowwater a few questions anyways. "Will there be a ceremony?" she asked.

"No, I'll just announce it," Sunstar mewed. "We can do that now, before the Dawn Patrol leaves," the leader mewed, hopping out of the den before leaping on top of it and calling the Clan together. Rainstone sat neatly at the edge of the clearing.

"RiverClan, in leaf-bare we lost many cats, and we are worn out from recovering the flood. Only in such desperate times would I accept an outsider into the Clan, but this cat has proved a worthy opponent and helpful to the Clan. Rainstone will become an apprentice of RiverClan," the announcement was met by mutterings, but no loud abjections.

"Through her apprenticeship she will be treated as a member of this Clan. At the end of her apprenticeship, it will be decided if she is to be a warrior or not," Sunstar announced. Cats nodded, it sounded reasonable.

"Sweetberry, you will take care of training Rainstone in how a RiverClan cat hunts and fights. Willowwater, you will make sure

she is educated on the ways of the Clans. The meeting is over," Sunstar jumped down and went over to his deputy while Sweetberry approached her with an annoyed expression and Willowwater with a smug one.

"Ready, *apprentice*?" Willowwater teased with a superior smirk. Rainstone rolled her eyes, she'd long ago learned to suck up with morons, of course, they had all been toms back then.

"You take her this morning, I'll take her this afternoon," Sweetberry mewed curtly to Willowwater, turning away. Rainstone guessed she'd never gotten over how Rainstone had scratched Flickertail.

"Okay, I already showed you the camp, but we'll start on how the Clan works," Willowwater mewed.

"Don't bother, Flickertail already told me about everything, for the most part," Rainstone almost laughed at Willowwater's disappointed expression. "But there is something I did want to ask you," she added in a lower tone.

"What is it?" Willowwater asked, obviously wanting to be of some help.

"What exactly did Nightwing do to get himself exiled," Rainstone asked.

"Well, he was accused of killing the former deputy and his brother, and then once deputy, of plotting to kill the leader," Willowwater mewed.

"Did he have any particular goals?" Rainstone asked.

"He was said to want to only be leader, but I suppose other motives may have been there," Willowwater mewed.

Rainstone frowned, "He talked about a rebellion when I fought him last night, any idea of what he might mean?" she asked.

Willowwater shrugged, "He could just want to get vengeance for being driven out, anyways, its ShadowClan's problem," the she-cat mewed.

Rainstone shook her head, she didn't think it was that simple, "No, he isn't stupid, he has a broader vision then that... But I'm not sure what," she murmured.

"Well, you were up all night, go sleep in the apprentices den, Sweetberry will work you hard if I know her," Willowwater mewed with a shrug.

Rainstone nodded in appreciation, her paws felt heavy and her body felt battered. Padding to the apprentice's den surrounded by reeds, she found an empty patch of grass and curled up, asleep in an instant.

...

"Make sure your shadow doesn't fall on the water, it'll scare the fish away," Sweetberry's unfriendly voice prompted Rainstone to shift her position so that her shadow didn't fall over the stream. "Wait until you see a fish and then grab it," Sweetberry ordered. Rainstone's sharp eyes caught sight of a flash of scale and she scooped her paw, but her paw hit nothing in the rushing stream.

"You have to scoop against the current," Sweetberry growled. Rainstone flattened her ears, the paw to do that with was her dead paw. Sighing, she leapt over the stream, ignoring Sweetberry's snarl for her to stay still.

Now her dead paw was propping her up and her good paw poised to strike. Not more than a few moments passed before she saw another flickering scale. She scooped down and out camp a curved fish glittering with water drops.

It landed on the ground beside her and she pounced and snapped its neck. "Not bad, maybe you'll make it anyways," Sweetberry mewed. Rainstone rolled her eyes; it was her third day as an *apprentice*. Sweetberry had showed her the territory the two days before, all the best hunting places as well.

Willowwater had filled in the few holes about the Clans, and now Rainstone knew as much about the Clans as any warrior, taking her superiority a little too far. Sweetberry was annoying to work with,

but a good teacher. Rainstone knew she had to do it and do it without complaining.

After a bit more needless instructions from Sweetberry, Rainstone had successfully caught two more fish. "Good, now this afternoon you can take care of the elders. Though make sure you eat and rest, Sunstar will want you to go to the gathering," the she-cat mewed with a hint of disapproval.

Rainstone shrugged as she picked up the fish. A gathering didn't sound that special, so you got to meet cats, so what? She padded in silence with Sweetberry, ignoring the gold cat's frowns. She knew she had been her first apprentice, definitely not what Sweetberry had wanted.

"Take that to the elders," Sweetberry ordered.

"No, I was going to dump them in the river," Rainstone muttered sarcastically. She stomped to the elders den, which was built under a large thorn bush. She dumped the fish in between the two elders, Mudtail was a dark brown tom with half-blind green eyes. Sheeplight was younger with pale cream and white fur with rose-tinged ears and amber eyes. In the mountains she would have been fought over.

Rainstone didn't say much to the elder's questions and offers of a story. "You know, you are quite strange, most cats would love a story from their elders," Mudtail croaked as she checked him for fleas.

"I don't like stories," Rainstone muttered.

"You said you weren't a rogue, didn't they teach you to be respectful to your elders in your Clan or whatever," Sheeplight asked.

"I lived in nothing like a Clan. Be glad you don't know. And no, there were no elders, every cat worked until they died," Rainstone mewed.

She cracked the ticks and then set about forming nests out of the moss Flickertail had given her. She smoothed and rounded it,

paying extra attention to any bumpy spots that might be hard or hidden thorns.

The elders climbed back into their nests. "Well, you do a much better job than those other apprentices," Mudtail muttered, settling down to doze. But Sheeplight stared at her.

"Can I do anything for you?" Rainstone asked through clenched teeth.

"Yes, tell me what you've gone through, Flickertail says its impossibly cruel," Sheeplight mewed.

"He had no right in telling you so," Rainstone retorted.

"It arose my curiosity, please do tell," Sheeplight mewed as if Rainstone hadn't said anything. Rainstone shook her head, but the elder persisted.

"I've lived a long life, I've seen many things, and how could this possibly be different?" Sheeplight mewed. The dismissal in her voice angered Rainstone and she found herself telling Sheeplight everything. The elder listened, her eyes only growing a little wide at time.

"That must have been hard," Sheeplight admitted at the end. Rainstone felt angry and washed-out. "I'm glad you have a chance to live in the Clans," Sheeplight mewed with a friendly flick of her tail.

"Sheeplight, please don't tell any cat," Rainstone begged before she left.

"Of course not, such a tale is for few ears. Though I would encourage you to tell Sunstar and Mintbreeze," the elder mewed.

"I'll think about it," Rainstone grunted, moving to leave.

"And Rainstone, even if your father doesn't want you, we do." Sheeplight blinked her amber eyes with sympathetic kindness.

Rainstone turned her head away as she padded out of the entrance, "Thank you."

...

After eating and resting, Rainstone joined Willowwater who had decided, since there wasn't much to teach Rainstone about the Clans, to be her personal guide in everything. The gray she-cat led her at the edge of the Clan as they traveled toward the island Rainstone had been shown the day before.

Willowwater was babbling about different warriors from different Clans, which ones were cute, which ones were good fighters, the deputies and leaders, and occasionally speculating if some of her apprentice friends had been made warriors yet.

Rainstone was only half-listening; she was thinking back to the cave as she watched the full-moon rise in the darkening sky. What were they doing now? Did they ever think of her? What would they say if her kits were dead because of her?

Willowwater jerked her back to reality with a flick over the ears. "Your turn to go, and be careful, its slippery and you haven't been taught to swim yet," Willowwater mewed, nudging her to a long, stripped tree. Its branches had fallen off and it had been smoothed by thousands of paws.

Rainstone jumped up and gripped the wood with wide paws, she was used to precarious passages. Her dead paw was difficult and she had to unsheathe her claws on that paw to keep it from slipping up. She jumped down on the opposite bank, standing beneath the trunk on the sandy shore as she waited for Willowwater.

"What happens now?" she asked, looking around the unraveling green forest.

"Now, we go meet the other Clans, ShadowClan is the only one here right now," Willowwater mewed, leading her directly into the middle of the island.

Willowwater halted her in front of an impressive looking smoky gray she-cat with hard gray eyes. "Wolfseed," Willowwater mewed respectively, dipping her head low. Rainstone cocked her head and recognized her name as a deputy that Willowwater had named. And

she recognized ShadowClan from the rank pine scent.

"Taking in a foreigner now?" Wolfseed mewed with mild amusement. "I remember Sunstar lecturing Stormstar when she took in a rogue last leaf-fall," the deputy mewed with stark shrewdness in her eyes.

Rainstone rolled her eyes, "I may have expected the replacement of Nightwing to be a bit more... professional," she mewed.

Wolfseed let out a hiss and Willowwater looked at her with shock. "You can't talk to a deputy that way!" Willowwater hissed.

Rainstone shrugged, "She doesn't even care," Rainstone responded with a wave of her tail.

"How do you know if I don't care?" Wolfseed asked, sounding almost curious.

"If you had, you would have been shocked into silence, you just hissed in annoyance," Rainstone responded, suppressing a yawn and looking around the green undergrowth.

"Observation won't make you a warrior," Wolfseed sniffed, striding past, though Rainstone caught the friendly twitch of an ear and knew she'd impressed the deputy with her calm analysis; at least enough to keep her from complaining about the remark.

Willowwater was looking at her with wide eyes and Rainstone just shrugged. Next Willowwater brought her to a pair of young ShadowClan she-cats. "Rainstone, this is Newtlight and Thistlebranch," Willowwater announced. "They were made warriors the same moon I was."

The cats exchanged greetings and Rainstone studied the two cats. Newtlight was a lean ginger, white, tawny, and black tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes. Thistlebranch was a white, gray-brown, and dull ginger tortoiseshell she-cat with clear blue eyes.

"So, how long have you been a part of RiverClan, Rainstone?" Thistlebranch asked, sounding calm and reserved.

"A few days, officially. But I've been staying with RiverClan for over half a moon," Rainstone mewed.

"How did you wind up in RiverClan territory?" Newtlight asked, sounding much more curious.

"Oh, it just happened that way," Rainstone mewed awkwardly.

"Some cats said you had kits, is that true?" Thistlebranch's voice was doubtful and Willowwater flinched. Sadness crashed over Rainstone afresh and she blinked numbly.

"Yes..." she muttered, turning to lick the fur along her spine to hide the few tears.

Rainstone fell into silence, idly listening to Newtlight and Willowwater compare themselves. Thistlebranch sat by her and eyed her slowly. "You seem more ShadowClan then RiverClan," the she-cat commented.

Rainstone shrugged, "Maybe, but I hate pines," she growled and Thistlebranch flinched in shock.

"How could you possibly hate pines?! They are so dark and tall, they shelter you and smell so good," Thistlebranch sighed in happiness.

Rainstone shrugged, she couldn't imagine living underneath pines. "Anyways, are you from the mountains? Like that one ThunderClan warrior?" Thistlebranch's question sent Rainstone's heart beating uncomfortably.

But then she fully realized the question, "What ThunderClan warrior?" she asked, turning her head to stare into Thistlebranch's robin-egg blue eyes.

"There's a ThunderClan warrior, kind of looks like you, but bigger," Thistlebranch mewed.

"What's his name?" Rainstone asked quickly. Could it just possibly be him?

"Uh, Scorchfur, or something like that. Sounds a little weird, like yours," Thistlebranch mewed.

Rainstone's hopes fell, but she wasn't ready to give up. "Is he here?" she asked, ThunderClan had just arrived; she had scented it once when the wind was blowing from that direction. It smelled like old leaves and mud, but she'd smelled worse.

Thistlebranch peered around before shaking her head, "Sorry, I don't see him here tonight. But I'm going to go find my brother. It was nice talking to you, Rainstone," Thistlebranch mewed with a cool air before standing up and padding away.

Rainstone looked around, Willowwater had gotten herself into a heated argument with Newtlight and another ShadowClan cat, but Rainstone doubted she'd welcome any help. Instead she stood up and started weaving her way among the cats.

There were more cats here than in the cave, but just barely, and she passed them without brushing fur and nodding at the greetings, all the while looking for a black and red pelt. She was beginning to think Thistlebranch was right, and the supposed warrior wasn't there, when she rounded a bend and bumped into a thick pelt.

She stumbled and fell on her back as the cat jumped against her. "Hey! Watch what you're doing!" she snapped. She rubbed her smashed muzzle indignantly and glared up, immediately falling silent.

She blinked twice to make sure she was seeing this right, making sure she was staring into a pair of bright amber eyes she'd thought she'd only see in her mind. "Scamp?" she whispered, recognizing the black and red fur she had missed so long.

"Oh my StarClan," the tom whispered hoarsely, staring at her with wide, shocked eyes.

Rainstone began to grow impatient, "Well don't just stand there, help me up!" she snapped. Scamp jumped to help pull her to her paws and they stood staring at each other for a moment. Confusion swarmed Rainstone, she'd imagined this moment in dreams, but

now that it was happening, what now?

"Rainstone? I-is that you?" Scamp whispered, emotions swirling in his eyes.

Rainstone nodded, painfully remembering the last time she had seen him, he'd left her in the mountains, knowing full well that she was in danger. He had used the excuse that Squirrel would be in danger, but Squirrel had been killed anyways.

Rainstone glared at him, "I see you're living quite lavishly," she growled.

Scamp flinched, his eyes growing angry, "And you as well, seeing that you are here. Bet you couldn't wait it out," Scamp sneered.

Rainstone drew herself up, aware that he still stood about to mouse lengths taller. "I left, because they were going to kill me," she snarled, angrily. This was not how she had expected their reunion would go.

"And whose fault is that?" Scamp asked coldly.

"My own. Don't talk to me as if I'm an idiot. You could have taken me with you," she growled, if that had happened, there would have been no kits to lose.

"I already explained a long time ago, they would have killed Squirrel," Scamp hissed.

"They killed her anyways!" Rainstone spat back, miserable fury shaped her words at all Scamp had put her through, just because he'd decided he had to go it alone.

Scamp flinched at that, amber eyes growing sad. "Why?" he asked.

"Because she bore Fox two kits, two *she-kits*," she spat and Scamp sighed.

"Look, I don't want to fight with you. I'm glad you're here," Scamp mewed calmly.

Rainstone relaxed slightly, it felt so good to look into his eyes, to breathe his scent, even though it was overlaid with ThunderClan odor. She pressed against his side and entwined her tail with his, like they used to. She brushed her muzzle against his and licked his cheek.

She stared as he flinched away, shaking his head. "Rainstone, no, we can't do this," Scamp mewed.

Rainstone cocked her head, "Yes we can, I could join ThunderClan or you could join RiverClan if you want to stay with the Clans. We are finally together again! I've been wishing and dreaming for this ever since you left five moons ago," Rainstone purred, stepping closer to touch noses.

But again, Scamp backed away and Rainstone felt pain tear at her chest and ice freeze at her. After all she'd been through, was he going to deny her this too? She loved him, she knew she did, she could feel it beating in her heart and in the longing at her paws.

Did he no longer feel the same? After all those nights they'd spent together, dreaming of a place like this? But Scamp was looking at her with hard eyes, no playfulness or love in them. "Rainstone, I still like you. But... I don't love you anymore. I've moved on... and you need to as well," Scamp mewed gently, as if talking to a kit.

Rainstone blinked, his words seemed foreign to her, she didn't understand them, but the truth in them clawed her heart, tore it down to threads. She saw for a crystal moment all angles clearly. Her face grew hard again.

"Who is it?" she snapped. "Who was so special that she made you stop thinking of me, after you told me you loved me," Rainstone snapped.

Scamp stared at her levelly. "Wispheart had my kits three days ago, Stonekit and Leafkit," Scamp mewed calmly.

The words sent a rush of unbelievable irony through Rainstone. Here she was, living alone among strangers, thinking for one moment she had something back; only to learn that her lover had

everything she had lost. She felt hot tears spring to her eyes and she couldn't stop them as two lone drops fell upon the green grass. In her mind, those two tears were for her two kits.

"Congratulations Scamp," she mumbled, trying to hold in her sobs.

"Its Scampfur now," Scamp mewed. Rainstone looked at him more closely. She found she didn't recognize his tight muscles, his dry, leaf-scented fur, and his amber eyes, once so lively, were serious and calm. He had changed.

Rainstone turned and stumbled away. It just wasn't fair! Why had she lost her kits and her love, when he had found a new love and two kits of his own? Why was he favored? Had she done something wrong to be punished? She wasn't aware of any evil she had ever done...

Or maybe it's because so many cats have died for me... I'll be punished forever. A lump formed in her throat and she swept past a group of WindClan cats, heading toward the outer rim of the gathering island. Once away from the main cats, she sped up until she was running, passing the few cats around in a blur.

She leaped over a fallen log and dashed down the sandy shore, not noticing the red shape racing toward her until it was too late and they crashed into each other. The opposing cat was stronger and so she was knocked back, rolling with him, for it was a tom.

She saw the earth and diamond sky and felt a dull ache in her chest where his head had collided with her and she felt the splash of water on her tail as she lay beneath him hissing at him to get up by the lake. The tom moaned and rolled over directly onto her spine and she fell down, trying to breathe.

"What happened?" the cat groaned.

"Get off of me and I might just tell you," Rainstone hissed, her misery swallowed up by her annoyance and pain.

"Oh! Sorry!" the tom gasped, jumping off of her with a huff. "Let me help you," the tom mewed, not even waiting for a response as he

grabbed her scruff and swung her to her paws.

"Hey! I don't need your help!" Rainstone growled, resenting the tom's touch.

"Sorry!" the cat mewed, not sounding very sorry at all.

Rainstone sat down and rubbed her chest, her wounds stung now, since they hadn't yet healed completely. She looked at the tom, he was young, her age about, maybe older. He was dark red and orange with laughing green eyes.

"My name is Needlepine," the tom introduced himself, from his scent, he was ShadowClan .

"Mine is Rainstone, not that it matters," she muttered.

"Real sorry about running into you, but the leaders are starting the gathering. Are you coming?" Needlepine asked.

Rainstone sighed before nodding. She felt angry and hot; she'd rather jump in the lake or curl down on the cool grass and sleep off her emotions. But she followed the tom, only curtly answering his questions about how she'd joined RiverClan. She wasn't going to tell him about her past.

She sat by him and learned he was Thistlebranch's brother, and she began to admire how he remained so cheerful and polite as she repeatedly brushed off his friendliness, it helped her forget Scampfur's brush-off. The leaders didn't say anything interesting, reporting the change of status in their cats and reporting how there had been more prey now that it was warm.

Well, duh, its warm, there is bound to be more prey! She was feeling frustrated and lost as the gathering ended and she followed RiverClan back to camp, not even looking for Scampfur.

She'd trained in RiverClan for less than five days and she'd learned more lessons then she had wanted. *Let's hope there are no more, I don't think my heart could take it. Though life seems to like teaching me ever lesson it knows.*

Chapter 26: Blacker Then Night

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"Oh no, no, no, no," Rainstone mewed, shaking her head and backing away.

Sweetberry flicked her tail impatiently. "If you want to be a real RiverClan cat you have to be able to swim! We've put it off for long enough, now it's time for you to swim!" the gold she-cat nudged her shoulder roughly and Rainstone stumbled until her paws were slipping into the fast moving current.

"Can't we at least start in shallow water?!" Rainstone begged. She guessed Sweetberry had purposefully chosen the largest stream in RiverClan territory, which happened to be the one she'd almost drowned in.

"No!" Sweetberry growled, slamming into her and sending her tumbling into the stripping water. Rainstone barely had time to draw in a breath before she was tumbled head over paws through the water. Her head scraped against something and she realized it was the pebbly streambed.

Growing frantic as her breath faded, Rainstone remembered Sweetberry's instructions and moved her paws through the water frantically, pushing the water down and herself up. Lucky for her, her wide paws pushed the water better than the Clan-cats and she jumped from underneath the water, keeping her bobbing head above water.

She struck out for the bank that swept past quickly. Her muscles burning, she felt the pebbled beneath her paws and was able to walk soaked, out of the stream. She collapsed on her side on the grassy meadow, resting her weary limbs and pounding heart.

I swam! Triumph glittered through her at the accomplishment and she ran through the motions she had used to swim. *It really was just*

like Sweetberry said... speaking of which, here she comes now.

Hearing the patter of paws, she sat up, still dripping water, though her diet of fish had turned her fur fairly silky. "See, you lived," Sweetberry mewed with a smirk, standing in front of her.

"No thanks to you," Rainstone muttered and Sweetberry rolled her green eyes and muttered something inaudible.

"Anyways, swimming is the last thing to accomplish before you can become a warrior. You learned hunting quickly and your fighting was already... acceptable," Sweetberry sniffed.

Rainstone smirked; Sweetberry only said that because Rainstone had beaten her every time. *What did you expect? Pepper was always much faster than you! And he always had a few tricks*... After a moon and a half off training, Rainstone was better than all the other apprentices and the warriors had come to give her a quiet respect; even though she kept her distance.

"Let's do some hunting before we go back to camp," Sweetberry yawned. The air was warm and the droning of honey bees was quite soothing.

Rainstone followed Sweetberry to the Flatrocks, an area along a stream where the bank was a slab of rock overlooking the river. Because the rocks were warm and low, it made it easy to hunt. They were a favorite place to fish.

Stormfang, who was hunting with her apprentice, Cloudypaw, nodded at them as they settled down to fish. Rainstone crouched, quite comfortably, but with her paws ready to move in an instant. They watched the flowing water with narrowed eyes and Rainstone was the first to flash out a paw, scooping out a large pike.

With not a word of approval from the other cats, Rainstone killed it and set back down to waiting. It was quiet business, and rather enjoyable to just lay on the warm rocks with heat soaking your pelt and the cool spray of the stream to dampen your pelt.

Unlike in other Clans, there were no hunting 'patrols,' cats were just

sent out to spend their day hunting until they had to go on border patrol. Rainstone liked this easy way of life, no pressure, just calm, pleasurable duties one day after another.

It made her hunger for excitement. She would ask the elders occasionally stories, but they had to be about battles, her paws itched to claw more than a fish scale, to smell more than the blood of a small cut on a rock or thorn.

But it was an easy life, gave her plenty of time to think and was very undemanding. She didn't know that at the moment it was mostly because RiverClan was too weak to be bold and involve itself with fights, but it made her nostalgic about the guilty excitement of breaking the rules.

She had considered a quick trip around the lake to see the other territories, but she didn't risk it yet with her position in RiverClan still up for debate. By dusk Rainstone had the largest pile of fish, but no cat commented, though she knew they would have if it had been Cloudypaw who had caught the most.

Not that she was going to complain, it was still sort of strange for her to be able to hunt without being punished, even though she'd been doing it for a long time now. Rainstone stepped over the steppingstones into the camp.

The other cats waded, but Rainstone preferred not getting her paws wet and then covered in sand and dirt. She deposited her catch and stared around rather uninterested. "Hey Rainstone! Come share with me!" Willowwater called to her, twitching her black ears.

Rainstone padded toward her, ignoring Sweetbery's sigh of annoyance and catching her exaggerated words. "Cloudypaw, it seems my apprentices has quit, would you be a dear and go feed the elders."

If she wants to cry like an injured fawn every time I do something she doesn't like, it's not my problem. Rainstone told herself firmly. She sat by Willowwater and helped herself to the trout her friend had.

"So, how did your day go?" Willowwater asked.

"It went," Rainstone muttered, chewing the fish.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Willowwater asked in a snort.

"I mean it was the same as the day before, and the day before that, and probably tomorrow," Rainstone mewed a little too sharply.

"So? Do you want something bad to happen?" Willowwater asked in annoyance.

Rainstone sighed, "No, but just *something* to happen," she grumbled.

Willowwater rolled her eyes, "If you're so bored, why don't you try to get to know your Clan-mates better? If you stay here, you'll be living with them the rest of your life," Willowwater pointed out.

Rainstone shrugged "Maybe, but I don't have to be friends with everyone," she mewed.

"You don't have too, just let them know you, it'll make things easier," Willowwater advised.

Rainstone stared at her scarlet streaks mingling with the indigo blue. "I'll think about it, but usually when I get restless, it either means something's going to happen, or it's time to move on."

...

"Okay, so kick out with your back legs and you will somersault through the water and knock your back into your opponent, your back is stronger than your legs, now try it on me," Sweetberry ordered, standing with the water over her back in the sluggish lake.

Rainstone had to stand on tip-toe just to keep her head over water and she tried to nod. She dove under the water, now accustomed to its slow movement. She kicked her back-legs, but they failed to hit the bottom of the lake and she flopped into Sweetberry's legs.

She hit the surface and Sweetberry cuffed her ear. "What was that?" the golden mentor asked coldly.

Hot shame seared Rainstone, more so because she had failed the

move. But she wasn't about to admit that, "It's too deep here! If I were to lure a cat out here, I wouldn't go in so far," she snapped.

Sweetberry glared at her, "You're so smart, if a cat was not standing in deep water, how much harder would it be to unbalance them?" the RiverClan cat asked.

"Not that it matters, nothing ever happens," Rainstone muttered, but saw the sense in Sweetberry's words. Trying again, she drove down deeper and kicked out faster, slamming her back into Sweetberry's legs and when the she-cat fell sideways, Rainstone's paws were right there to trap her.

Sweetberry emerged, quite soaked. "Good job," she mewed, a slight gleam of approval in her eyes. "Your swimming skills are coming along nicely," Sweetberry nodded.

Rainstone had only been swimming for a quarter moon, and Sweetberry had plunged right into the methods the RiverClan cats had created for hunting in the lake. Sweetberry had told her that back in their old home from centuries ago, there had only been one big river, and when they had moved to the lake, they had to make new techniques for hunting in the lake.

Although one of the strictest rules was no swimming in the middle of the lake if there were Two-legs, and no swimming without a partner in case of emergency. Anyways, Rainstone had found her wide paws useful in swimming and had preferred swimming in the tranquil lake instead of the streams.

Now Sweetberry had moved on to fighting which was much more interesting and had put her restless feelings on hold, though she could still feel it at night. "Are we already done?" Rainstone asked, frowning as Sweetberry headed for shore.

"The other moves are more advanced and you'd need more energy to accomplish them, it's been a long day already," Sweetberry mewed without turning her head.

Rainstone shrugged, she was a little tired and the sun was starting to go down, chilling the water in the lake. She followed her mentor

to shore and shook out her fur, despite its silkiness, it still held water like no cat's business and she had retained her own scent, not taking on the complete fish scent that only gently overlaid her own.

Sweetberry paused as Rainstone sat by the shore, her paws digging into the sand. "Are you coming?" Sweetberry asked, head tilted to one side like a bird.

"In a bit, I'm not ready to go back to camp yet," Rainstone mewed despondently, watching the coming and retreating waves with thoughtful eyes. Sweetberry shrugged and left, her paw-steps fading into the distance.

The water, looking red in the dusk light, rolled and bubbled gold over the sandy shore before retreating to a deeper blue, then coming back, fiery in gold and red. It came and went in a complete rhythm, not missing a beat and not even considering resting. *I'd like to be like that, to keep coming and going without missing a step, not one.*

She sighed, eyes closed in content as she listened to the gentle waves, so small and calm but large enough to keep the beach soft and sandy. Rainstone started swaying in the motion of the waves, feeling the breeze off the lake ruffle her whiskers.

She nearly jumped out of her skin as a shriek of warning cut through the peaceful air. She jumped to her paws and dashed toward where the hisses and shrieks echoed suddenly. Her paws were cold while her blood felt like ice in her veins, her mind was numb except for the thoughts of her restlessness that had troubled her.

The sand flashed beneath her paws and she kicked it up as she raced, her dead paw staying flat and level as she sped over the minerals. She soon found that the shrieks came from the Thunderpath, the hard, smelly, black rock she'd seen when leaving the first time.

The pungent scent of ShadowClan was strong and fresh as the RiverClan scent. *A patrol scuffle maybe?* She guessed it was the dusk patrol, and picked up the scents of Mintstream with Webclaw and Pikepaw. It was too small a patrol to fight off a ShadowClan patrol.

Rainstone's eyes widened as she saw how many enemy cats there were, at least ten big, black cats and four more of different colors. *Is it an attack patrol?* Then she noticed something else as her paws hit the pavement, the cats with ShadowClan scent were fighting alongside the RiverClan patrol against the black cats which smelled like the crowfood and the Thunderpath.

Rainstone's eyes narrowed as she saw a large black tom with massive brown paws holding down a struggling orange and dark red tom. Rainstone felt a growl as she recognized Needlepine, the annoyingly friendly ShadowClan tom, trapped.

She narrowed her eyes and leapt straight for Nightwing, tumbling him backward as he raised his paw to strike Needlepine. She raked her claws down his muzzle and she saw his eyes narrow angrily as he recognized her.

"Can't stay away, can you?" he snarled. She retaliated by clawing his face again so that blood dripped into his mouth. He kicked her away and clawed her shoulder. Rainstone landed lightly on her paws and turned on him again, but he had disappeared and two spitting black cats were cornering her away the rest of the cats.

One was a lithe she-cat and the other was a muscular tom with paws too big for even him. She dodged his blow and nipped the she-cat's paw as she swung it at her. Then the two lunged for her and Rainstone rolled out of the way, preying on the little-she-cat first.

She grabbed her and threw her in the lake, as they were right on the shore. The black tom gave a roar and raced for her, Rainstone sped in front of the clumsy tom and bounded lightly onto the rickety half-bridge. Rainstone turned to face the tom at the end of the bridge.

"All out of room," the tom snarled, glaring at her maliciously.

"Not quite," Rainstone smirked, putting extra emphasis on her rumbling accent. With one bound she had knocked the tom into the water and leaped down, aiming for his struggling head. She pushed him underwater and then dove down to the lakebed, just as she had

practiced that day.

She kicked the lakebed and crashed into the tom's flailing legs. He immediately went under and Rainstone pressed him under her, holding him with a cruel grip until the bubbles escaping his mouth were few.

Then she heaved him up to the surface where he coughed weakly as Rainstone pushed him roughly to shore. Once there, she strained to toss him by the shivering black she-cat, approaching in a threatening stalk with claws sliding out and a snarl on her face, still with her fur dripping wet.

The she-cat hastily nudged the tom and they half-ran, half-stumbled, away and past the fight that still raged on. Rainstone jumped back in the fight, aiming for a foul-smelling long-legged black she-cat. She clawed the she-cat's shoulder and when the she-cat knocked out her paw, Rainstone fell and rolled into her and her long legs were tangled as Rainstone clawed her exposed belly.

The she-cat shrieked with pain, and for her part, shredded Rainstone's left ear. But Rainstone was able to roll her over and pin her to the ground, clawing her sides and belly until her claws were full of black fur and crimson blood.

The she-cat's shriek bubbled and Rainstone drove her away from the fight with a sharp scratch to the hind paw. Around her, the fight was ending and only Nightwing with three black cats remained.

"We'll be back," Nightwing hissed, eyes enraged as the Clan cats cornered him hissing. Rainstone strolled up behind him and pushed through his rank of three cats, ignoring the disbelieving stares every cat gave her. She just shrugged, she needed to get back to her Clan-mates, and that was the most direct route.

"Well come back later, it seems your friends have been scared away," Rainstone mewed with a yawn, looking over her shoulder.

Nightwing snarled, an angry one, but one that recognized defeat. Rainstone turned her head and she heard the patter of swiftly departing paws and knew they were gone. The RiverClan and

ShadowClan cats were quickly checking themselves for injuries and Rainstone used her knowledge of herbs to fix up a dangerous slash in Pikepaw's flank.

Rainstone glanced at the ShadowClan cats, they were huddled just over their territory around Needlepine, whose fur was mostly red from blood. Rainstone felt a twinge in her belly as she saw the enormity of the wound. It was a gaping wound with the skin torn apart on both sides and still oozing with blood.

A yellow-gold she-cat with brown eyes was frantically trying to stop the bleeding with bunches of grass. "You'll never stop it that way, and you'll just get the wound infected," Rainstone mewed, stepping up to the border.

"And what do you know? You're just a rogue," snarled a wide-pawed murky brown tom with just as murky green eyes.

"Yes, and that meant I had to learn all about the herbs to heal myself," Rainstone responded sharply, deciding to ignore the insult. "Now you can let me help him or risk the very high chance that he'll die before you get him to camp," she growled.

The bright gold she-cat glanced at the tom, "Let her help, Frogfoot! We've got nothing to lose and Needlepine's life is at stake!"

The tom, Frogfoot, growled, "Fine, but Sunfire, if he dies because of this cat, I'm not holding back." He growled ominously.

"He won't die if you let me help him," Rainstone mewed, stepping over the border and settling down by Needlepine's flank. "He needs cobwebs, thrushes, and tormetil," Rainstone listed off the plants.

"Tormentil?" Sunfire echoed, confused.

Rainstone muttered a curse under her breath, "You cats don't use it, apparently... marigold or horsetail then," Rainstone ordered and Sunfire dashed off with a tabby-tortoiseshell she-cat.

Rainstone started by cleaning Needlepine's fur of blood and the bits of grass with the wet moss she had Frogfot bring her. The more she saw the wound and Needlepine's slowing breathes, the more she

doubted she could fix it.

Finally she had to resort to something Crisp had showed her to do but once. She grabbed a long, thin, strong strand of twine, she thought it was from ivy, and grabbed a small, sharp-pointed stick. With Frogfoot and a silver-blue tom she didn't know leaning over her shoulder and breathing down her neck, it made her job that much harder.

Carefully poking a small hole in the torn flesh, she began stitching the wound closed and gradually the bleeding stopped and a ragged line showed where the wound had been closed. Then with some more wet moss, she washed off the blood and applied the marigold juices and horsetail poultice before tightly binding her work with the cobwebs and rushes.

"Okay," Rainstone sighed, leaning back and eyeing her handiwork. Crisp would have been appalled by the messy job, but she was out of practice. "Tell your medicine-cat when you get back that as soon as the wound has closed itself to take out the twine, or else it'll be stuck in him forever and could later lead to infection," Rainstone mewed.

The cats nodded and took Needlepine carefully on their shoulders and carried him away. No cat said thank you, probably out of stubborn pride. But Rainstone didn't care, she wouldn't have usually have received thanks back in the cave anyways.

Rainstone looked around, the sun had disappeared long ago, and the moon was floating low above the tops of the willows in RiverClan territory. Her Clan-mates had left her behind without telling her and so she started back to camp alone and covered in blood.

Hope I won't attract a fox... I doubt I could fight it. She thought as she stumbled in a jagged line along the shore. It wasn't the most direct route to camp, but it seemed easiest for her tired paws. The lake washed off her bloody gray paws and washed away her small red paw prints.

There was something significant about the battle, but she couldn't

figure it out to her tired mind. Suddenly she tripped and barely caught herself as her muzzle was held less than a whisker's length to the sandy ground. On the ground was a dark blue-gray shell.

Rainstone blinked, unable to move as she stared at its almost fuzzy complexion. Then a wave rolled over it and when Rainstone saw it again it was black, probably with sediment, but turned black nonetheless.

Of course! Every cat fighting with Nightwing was black! And when he was trying to recruit Flashkit he commented on how her black fur was a sign of strength! He must think that black-furred cats are special and thus are using them in his fight...

The sudden clarity sent Rainstone's heart skipping with ideas and she hurried back to camp with renewed strength. She splashed through the shallow stream surrounding the camp and headed straight for Sunstar's den.

"Woah, where are you going?" the worried and snappish voice was Flickertail and the cream and red tom bounded up to her side, tail flicking restlessly as he checked her few wounds.

"I need to talk to Sunstar!" Rainstone burst out, kneading her paws on the ground in impatience to share her spectacular plan.

"It can wait until after I've treated your wounds, I'm sure Sunstar would agree with me," Flickertail added stubbornly as he tried to push past him. She sighed in admission and followed him to the sandy den.

Her wounds were not deep and it did not take Flickertail long to bind her wounds with some goldenrod. "So, you stayed out late after the other cats, what happened? They said you were talking to some ShadowClan cats," Flickertial asked, eyes narrowing slightly.

Rainstone flicked her tail, "One of the ShadowClan cats was dying, and I knew I could help, so I did. And it was very rude of Mintstream to leave without telling me," she added sharply.

"Did you save the ShadowClan warrior?" Flickertail asked, ignoring

her hinted accusation.

"I don't know, he was alive when I left but... he was pretty badly wounded, I had to stitch him up, and that's always risky," she mewed. She waited for Flickertail to agree, but Flickertail just stared at her, confused.

"How did you stitch a cat up?" Flickertail asked.

Rainstone was a little shocked; it'd always been part of her training, even though Crisp had hurried over it since it was only used in the most serious circumstances. "Well, you take some twine, I prefer a braided cobweb though, and you weave it through tiny holes in the torn skin that you make with a sharp stick or rock, and you pull it tight to close a wound," Rainstone mewed.

Flickertail's eyes were bright and he leaned forward, "Can it be used on all wounds?" he asked.

Rainstone nodded, "But you only want to use it when there's no other option, because then later you have to remove the stitch and if it falls apart it might cause infection or really hurts. You have to do it as soon as the wound will stay closed on its own, and then it just pulls right out," Rainstone nodded to herself.

Flickertail cocked his head to one side; "I will have to remember that, thank you," Flickertail mewed.

Rainstone shrugged, "I'm going to go talk to Sunstar now," she mewed.

"Can't it wait until tomorrow?" Flickertail asked with a sigh.

"Nope," and Rainstone hopped out of the den and stole away toward Sunstar's rock den. "Sunstar! Can I talk to you?" she called softly in a loud whisper, peeking her head in the den to stare at the shadowy form.

"Huh? Oh, Rainstone, you're back, o-of course, what is it?" Sunstar yawned sitting up tiredly and rubbing at his eyes with a paw.

"I want to do something, and I need your permission," Rainstone

mewed, stepping into the den and letting the ivy fall behind her, sending little ripples of silver light to flow behind her.

"Yes?" Sunstar inquired, looking more awake.

"I want to join Nightwing's group, as a spy," Rainstone announced.

Sunstar's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. "Why? How will you get in?" Sunstar asked, sounding too confused to object quite yet.

"I noticed at the fight that he only had black cats fighting with him, I can get in that way. And as for why, I believe it is imperative that we find out his plans," Rainstone stated.

"But, you're not black, you're gray," Sunstar sounded even more confused.

Rainstone allowed a sly look to flow over her face. "If I can have tomorrow off of training, I can be blacker than night by evening," she mewed.

Sunstar was slowly shaking his head, "No, you can't do it; it's a good idea, but if Nighhtwing figured it out you'd be trapped by enemies," Sunstar mewed, standing up and flicking his tail. "I'll ask Creekshade, she is already black, and has much more experience," Sunstar added.

"But she's obviously RiverClan! I look like I don't belong to the Clans, my fur isn't super silky and my scent is still my own," Rainstone protested. "Besides, I've seen Creekshade lie, she couldn't pull it off for Nightwing," Rainstone mewed.

"But you still wouldn't have an escape if something should go wrong!" Sunstar protested, real worry in his eyes. *Does he already care for me as a Clan-mate?*

"I'm a master at escaping, don't you worry about that," Rainstone said wryly, thinking of her escape from the mountains and then from the foxes and dog.

"You can't go alone," Sunstar mewed stubbornly.

"If I went with a cat it would look more suspicious, going alone would be better," Rainstone argued.

"But won't he recognize you from your few encounters?" Sunstar challenged.

"I don't think so, at our first encounter he was more focused on Willowwater and on our second it was night, and just now, I doubted he would have recognized me if I hadn't been right on top of him. If I acquire a new scent and look, I highly doubt he'll recognize me," Rainstone said.

"Maybe... but your shape is rather peculiar," Sunstar mewed, motioning toward her wide paws and round head.

Rainstone rolled her eyes, "Maybe odd for a Clan-cat, but not for a rogue," she huffed.

"How do you know he will allow you to join?" Sunstar asked, getting up to pace.

"Oh, leave that detail to me... I have charm," Rainstone mewed. Although she shrank away from using her feminine features in seduction against any cat, especially Nightwing.

"Charm?" Sunstar snorted, staring at her as if she were crazy.

"Yes, charm, I just prefer not to use it," Rainstone mewed in a hard tone.

Sunstar eyed her for a moment, "I'll make a deal, if you can succeed in *charming* me, I'll allow you to go through this," he mewed, nodding to himself.

Rainstone hesitated for a moment, she had no doubt she could pull it off, but she didn't want to do it to Sunstar, it lowered her opinion of the cat and she held Sunstar in respect. *Just act it and you'll be able to go undercover*.

She nodded to herself and closed her eyes, preparing herself mentally for how she would act. When she was ready after a few moments she relaxed herself and started moving forward, her head

level with her shoulders and snaking forward a little.

She moved naturally, almost a little too naturally, her body moving in a perfect curving ripple. Sunstar's eyes had widened in the first moment and he was watching her very closely. Rainstone made her ears point in interested as they landed on Sunstar, as if she was just first noticing him, and her gaze became one of playful daringness.

She hated in on the inside and remembered the one time in which she'd used Night, funny now how her enemy held part of her former mate's name. *It's almost sickly cruel*, she thought, rubbing her slender side against Sunstar's shoulders.

His gaze was whole-heartedly on her and she was relieved that he looked completely clueless. If she had done this to Snake, he would have most certainly have given in to the feelings he would have recognized. *Good thing Sunstar has never had a mate...*

Now, with Sunstar almost swaying to her movements, she approached him, and making herself seem very small, sat with her front paws on his paws and looked up into his face in the most pleading, kit-like way.

"Now, you would let me join you if I asked you, right?" she asked in a voice that was both light and heavy and compelled the listener to agree. Only strong-minded cats could resist, as she had found.

Sunstar gave a small, tiny nod, still wide-eyed and a confused frown on his face. He had absolutely no clue what her words might mean to an uneducated rogue. Rainstone dropped the act and stepped back and Sunstar still looked confused so she cuffed him over the ear.

"Oh, err, what was that?" Sunstar asked, still looking unsure.

"That is charm, as many cats would understand it," Rainstone mewed roughly.

"I-I didn't even know what was happening, I just felt something... odd, it was quite strange," Sunstar mewed in a tight voice. "Don't ever do it again," he added in a growl.

Rainstone nodded, "I only did it to satisfy you," Rainstone mewed. "As you can see, I can handle it all, after all, I am a rogue," she mewed, struggling not to growl.

Sunstar sighed and nodded, "Alright, if you can turn your fur black by tomorrow evening you may do this," he assented with a tired sigh.

Rainstone jumped and nodded, *finally! Some action!* "I'm going now, you probably won't see me until tomorrow evening, but I won't have gone far," Rainstone mewed as she left, racing toward the entrance. She didn't even feel tired as she headed out of the territory, more toward the ShadowClan side.

She caught herself a mouse on her way out, guessing she wouldn't eat again until she was all done and finished. First, she found a pool in a rock slap in the shade of a pinon pine tree, more common in the mountains then here.

In the pool the water looked yellowish, and a sniff of the water told her it was full of ochre, the first step of the dye she was going to make. She had learned to make dyes from Crisp for several reasons, none of which she'd participated in. *We never colored feathers anyways, it was a waste of time... until now*.

Now she went to the pinon tree, its pine smell was the strongest of all the pines, in her opinion anyways. *Which makes sense, with it being the original pine tree and all.*

Anyways, she extracted some pith from the wood with her claws, it took quite a long time to cut down so deep and when she had finished and turned the ochre pool black with pith, the sun was edging its way over the trees.

Now came the easiest part, using a long stick, she mixed the pool until it was hardly thicker than water. With a small nose wrinkle at the smell, she slipped herself into the shaded pool. The water was cold and the bottom of the pool was grainy.

Rainstone laid her back against the pool, just the tip of her nose over the water. She wanted this to be a thorough job, one that

would last at least two moons before fading away. She dozed on and off until the sun was starting to go down.

She was beginning to feel bored, just soaking in the pool all day. But she dared not move, she didn't want to make it streak and she settled to listening to the strange echoing bubbly sounds through the water.

It was quite useful; she could hear vibrations as well as any creature and she knew if there was a mouse or a rabbit. But nothing bigger than a hare passed near her. Probably because of the smell the pool created.

At last, with her belly rumbling and her paws itching to move, the sun set and she could emerge from her pool. She moved slowly, her muscles softened by the water. And she felt heavier than ever as she climbed out, the water dripping from her pelt.

She did not shake herself or lick the water off, she wanted it to soak in thick and true. She headed into RiverClan territory, waiting impatiently to find an illuminated pool to see herself in. Finally, only a couple heartbeats from entering camp, she found a moon-lit pool and she looked down at herself.

She could barely restrain a purr of satisfaction. She still had the black-blue eyes, still had the gently pointed ears, the round face and the slender figure. But her fur was most definitely blacker than night.

Chapter 27: Undercover

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Rainstone was stopped by Sunstar immediately as she entered camp, with her fur black as a crow's wing. His eyes widened as she stared at her new black colored fur. "H-how did you do that?" Sunstar asked warily.

Rainstone shrugged, "Where I'm from, particular cats have to learn how to dye things. I didn't stick around long enough to ever use it though," Rainstone mewed, dropping his gaze.

"Well, a deal is a deal, are you sure you want to do this?" Sunstar asked slowly.

Rainstone nodded, she needed some excitement in her life! "If it's alright, I want to head out soon as possible," she mewed.

Sunstar shifted his paws; meanwhile, Minstream came up behind him, her fur silver in the moonlight and stared at her silently. "Wait until dawn at least, than you can have a good meal and Flickertail can check your wounds quickly," Sunstar mewed, flicking his tail over her newly-shredded ear; it was full of nicks now.

Rainstone sighed and nodded in agreement, heading toward the apprentice reed den. The other cats were asleep and Rainstone curled in her nest made of moss. For the first time, she had doubts.

Would she be recognized by her eyes or scent? Those were two very easy ways of identifying a cat. Would she be given away by her fresh wounds? Would it be so easy to get in? Would her dye last long enough? What if she was asked to attack the Clans? Would she really have to use her...'charm.'

The questions just sent thrills of excited anticipation through her. She'd be undercover, just like back in the cave. She thought of her friends and family, would they approve of her risking her life?

Somehow, she guessed they wouldn't.

She closed her eyes in silent misery; *I always make bad decisions from my heart...* "*No, your heart knows what's best, and your family wouldn't change one thing about you*." The shifting old voice warmed Rainstone and she fell asleep, thanks Song.

...

The next morning, she woke early and was over to Flickertail's den before most cats were awake. "Wha?!" Flickertail jumped as she loomed over his sleeping form.

"Can you check my wounds? I'm leaving for a while, I'm sure Sunstar will call a meeting about it," Rainstone mewed curtly.

"Where are you going?" Flickertail asked, sounding tense as he rubbed some juices into her sore wounds a few moments later.

"I don't know, it is an adventure," Rainstone smirked. Flickertail rolled his eyes as she refused to answer any of his questions.

Once Flickertail was done, Rainstone rushed to Sunstar's den. Sunstar raised his head from where he was grooming his chest as she came in. "Can I go now/" she asked impatiently.

"Have you eaten?" Sunstar asked, blinking slowly.

"Err, I can do that later," Rainstone mewed, though her stomach growled just then.

"Go eat, then I will be at the entrance to see you off," Sunstar mewed, reluctance dripped from every word and motion.

Rainstone rushed to the fresh-kill pile and grabbed a small fish, gulping it down in a few moments. She looked up, Sunstar was talking with Minstream near the entrance and Rainstone got up to join them. She felt a twinge off hesitation, *I wish I had time to say goodbye to Willowwater...*

She hated to admit it, but the annoying she-cat was probably her closest friend at the moment. But she turned her paws firmly

toward Sunstar, Willowwater would be waiting for her when she returned.

"So, are you ready?" Sunstar asked, eyes still wishing her to drop out of the plan.

"Yep! Oh, ask the cats not to talk about me leaving the Clan, I don't know where Nightwing has his cats, but its close by, I don't want him overhearing anything," Rainstone mewed.

Sunstar nodded, "When will you be back?" Sunstar asked.

Rainstone tilted her head, "The dye should only last a moon or two, so I'll be back around then," she mewed.

Sunstar nodded slowly, stepping aside to allow her to leave. "Be careful," he mewed as she padded past him.

She looked over her shoulder, touched by his concern, "Always." Now out of camp and nothing binding her to anything, she felt free and energy sparked at her paws and surged through her as she raced toward the border near ShadowClan.

She turned up along the Thunderpath. She wrinkled her nose and forced herself, once outside the border, to wash the RiverClan scent off, and then rolled on the Thunderpath, covering her scent with its stink.

Then she continued to trot along besides the Thunderpath. Not one Monster rumbled until the sun had risen over the tree-tops. And then she turned away, unnerved by the crushing power of the glinting creatures.

She wandered around aimlessly, keeping her eyes out for anything strange. Around sun-high she got hungry and tired. She found shade in a willow that stood over mossy ground and near a swampy little pool with scum on it and sat down to rest and wait.

Ignoring the annoying dragonflies, she caught a shrew in the reeds and ate it absently as she watched the pond lazily. She twitched her ears at the pound of paw-steps and glanced up nonchalantly as two black cats surrounded her.

She eyed their hostile eyes, but noticed they kept their claws sheathed. "You're hunting on our territory, move along," a familiar small black she-cat growled. Rainstone narrowed her dark eyes as she recognized the small she-cat from the battle.

The other cat was a lanky tom with torn ears and fresh pink wounds; he must have been in the fight, but she hadn't seen him. "Now, rogue," the tom spat.

Rainstone got to her paws gracefully. "I don't think I want to go anywhere," she mewed, thinking quickly. She'd heard three steps of paw-steps, so another cat was nearby. Watching maybe? Maybe to see if she was worthy of joining Nightwing's ranks?

Rainstone felt a scathing retort on her tongue for the cat's insult of calling her a 'rogue,' but she couldn't act as usual. She'd already decided to play the remote, cold rogue, not bragging but letting her actions speak for themselves. She unsheathed her claws and watched as the two cats circled around her, trying to get her back to one of them.

Rainstone stifled the urge to roll her eyes. She leapt into the willow tree, slithering along the branch and dropping down a moment later on the tom. He bucked, but she held on, claws wrenching his head up so that he couldn't move very well.

He tried to roll on his back, the she-cat positioned to attack her. Rainstone jumped off and at the she-cat. Guessing the tom would take a few moments getting back to his paws. Using her superior strength, she pressed a paw against her neck, despite the frantic flurry of swipes scratching her shoulders.

Rainstone sprang away as the tom leapt for him, watching in amusement as they collided and tumbled into the pond. With a purr of satisfaction, she laid down under the willow again, tail wagging and eyes narrowed in amusement.

The two black cats scrambled out of the shallow water and stood, looking like drowned rats, glaring at her. The fact they didn't attack her again confirmed she'd been tested. She flicked an ear back as a set of paw-steps approached her from behind.

"You did very well, rogue. Your black fur is not disgraced," the rough mew was familiar and she knew it was Nightwing before she turned her head. Instinct told her to get to her paws, but she had to stay in character.

"And who are you?" she questioned, narrowing her eyes in supposed suspicion.

"Nightwing, greatest warrior in all the Clans," Nightwing mewed, eyes searching hers.

She refused to show anything and flicked her gaze over him despondently. "I never trusted the Clans, always insulting me for not being of one of their ranks. Hope they kill themselves with all their fighting," she added in a mutter.

"Oh, so maybe you could be of use to me," Nightwing's eyes gleamed.

"And how would I be of use?" Rainstone asked.

"I need some help in taking over the Clans, I need fighters," Nightwing mewed.

"And what do I get out of this?" Rainstone asked wryly, plucking at some remaining scraps of the shrew.

"Once I'm in charge, you won't ever go hungry or half to scratch a flea, for all the Clans would be your servants," Nightwing was using an enticing voice, but his words couldn't stop a shiver of fear along her spine.

"Something wrong?" Nightwing mewed menacingly, stepping over her, fangs showing a little.

"Sounds too good to be true, besides, I've seen cats who live like that, it always ends," she lied. Her cats hadn't ended yet.

Nightwing tilted his head, "Where are you from?" he asked.

"Beyond the lake there is a forest, I lived near the base of the mountains in the north. Quite pleasant there," Rainstone mewed,

thinking of where Flake and her family had been.

"Why did you leave than?" Nightwing growled, though he was beginning to look perplexed that she wasn't intimidated.

"Got restless, and the fox problem wasn't safe for kits," Rainstone mewed, a shadow of sadness flickering over her gaze.

"What happened?" Nightwing asked, sounding like a curious kit more than a dangerous warrior.

Rainstone locked him with a flinty gaze. "Why don't you tell me what I'd have to do to get in this plan of yours, instead about my past," she asked sharply.

"Oh, of course," Nightwing mewed. "You would come to my camp, train, eat, and live there. You'd also have to do whatever I told you."

"Doesn't sound fun," Rainstone grunted.

"The rewards are rich, but I do not have all day, is it a yes or a no?" Nightwing asked.

"Hmm... Why not, I'll give it a try, but if I don't like it, I'm heading on my way," Rainstone mewed sharply, getting to her paws.

Nightwing nodded, eyes shining in triumph. *I wonder what he'd say if he knew I was Rainstone...* "What is your name?" Nightwing asked as he and the two other cats escorted her away from the pool.

Rainstone glanced at him, "Never needed a name, my mate gave me one once, but that's just for him," she mewed, making sure she kept to her story.

"Hmm... well, you'll need a name. So we shall call you..." Nightwing paused for a moment, head tilted.

"If you don't mind, call me Pepper," Rainstone mewed, thinking of her brother.

"Why?" Nightwing asked.

"Family name," she answered curtly.

"Alright, you will be called Pepper."

...

Nightwing and his two companions led her across a stretch of land that had practically everything. There were stretches of peat bare-land, thick woody forest patches, blackout pines, and even gentle hills with a few spotted trees and grassy meadows with tiny ponds with thin streams connecting them.

It was quite lovely, and Rainstone wondered why the Clans didn't live more in this area and why Nightwing was making such a fuss over the Clan territory. Eventually, they came to a sudden halt, the ground turning from cropped grass to sand, then stone, then nothing.

Down was a steep, craggily trail strewn with rocks and wood. It let out into a sandy bottom full of sand-brown rocks full of holes. "This is our camp," the black she-cat announced, eyes glowing with fondness and pride.

"It is a very nice camp," Rainstone mewed, impressed in spite of herself. It was a little smaller than the RiverClan camp, but was well sheltered. The only thing wrong was that she could see it filling up with water in heavy rain seasons.

Nightwing turned to her now, "You will stay here for now, if you can make it, then this will be your home until we take over the Clans, you will train, hunt, and live with these cats. I suggest you establish friendly relations if you don't want to die, we have no real laws except one," Nightwing mewed, his fangs showing as he smirked menace.

"And what may that rule be?" Rainstone asked coolly, curling her claws tightly in her paws.

"Obey everything I say," Nightwing mewed simply before turning and jumping nimbly down into the camp. The black tom gave her an annoyed side-long glance and leaped down, lashing his tail

sharply across her muzzle. His shoulders still were speckled red from her claws.

Rainstone rolled her eyes and glanced at the small she-cat. "Nightwing wants me to give you a tour and to introduce you," the she-cat grumbled, but she moved easily forward with a friendly twitch of her tail.

"Be careful on this trail, it's a little tricky," the she-cat mewed as they went down the shadow-laid trail.

Rainstone moved her paws easily, instinctively knowing where to put her paws so they wouldn't slide on the cool sand and knowing which rocks to place her paws on without them falling away.

"Wow, you're good at this, Pepper," the she-cat mewed with almost an exaggeration as they reached the bottom.

Rainstone shrugged, "I grew up around the mountains, remember? I'm used to it. Cats who weren't usually didn't get a second chance," she mewed wryly. The small she-cat looked a little offset, as if disturbed about living in a place where a wrong step ended in death.

"Excuse me, but do you have a name?" Rainstone asked, a little annoyed that she hadn't been introduced yet.

"Oh, it's Slate, sorry," the little cat answered, ducking her head in an embarrassed fashion. "Anyways, those are the sleeping holes, usually a few cats fit in one, you can share with me and Raven," Slate mewed, nodding at the rocks with holes that lined half of the round camp.

"Does Nightwing sleep there?" Rainstone asked, eyes peering into the dark holes that seemed full of black fur. If Nightwing was playing leader, he'd probably want to sleep like a leader and separate himself from his troops.

"No, he sleeps over there in a big den all by himself," Slate sighed almost dreamily. Rainstone glanced at her but didn't comment.

She glanced at the rock Slate had inclined to, it was different, more

reddish then the other rocks and it made a cave instead of holes in the lumpy rock. It jutted out of the wall a few tail-lengths to make a ledge and glowed sharp and pointed and glowed, it probably looked red as blood at dusk.

"Nightwing makes announcements from there occasionally and watches over us during the day," Slate explained. "We also keep our fresh-kill pile over there, it's in the shade most of the day so it stays good longer," Slate added, nodding at a heap of small, furry, dead bodies.

"So, you said I'll sleep with you and a Raven cat," Rainstone mused as Slate stared at the prey with a hungry look in her eyes.

"Oh, yeah, Raven is my best friend from when I was little, she's over this way," Slate mewed, leading her over to the shaded part of the sand-patched hollow.

Rainstone almost rolled her eyes as she recognized the she-cat they were approaching. The she-cat stood up and watched them with amber eyes that gleamed red. Her winding stance and long-legs allowed Rainstone to identify her from the battle, the last cat she had faced.

I'm surprised, after the wounds I gave her, I would have assumed she'd have to stay in her nest a few days, Rainstone mused. Then she flicked her now nicked ear, and remembered that she had suffered from wounds as well.

The reminder of them made them ache and sting and she longed to lie herself gently on the cool ground. Luckily, she'd groomed her fur so that her fur mostly covered her wounds. "Raven, how are you doing? Are your wounds doing okay?" Slate asked, touching noses with greeting while Rainstone hung back.

"I'm fine, stop fussing. I wish I'd been able to do something today, but I've been stuck in camp all day! If I ever find that little gray cat again... I'll make her really regret it," Raven hissed, obviously in a terrible mood.

Rainstone smirked to herself; *I'm not gray anymore*... "You may just

get the chance, from all of Nightwing's talk," Rainstone mewed, stepping in.

Raven eyed her slowly, her gleaming eyes not betraying anything. "Yes, Jet reported a black cat on our territory... so you impressed Nightwing, eh? What's your name," Raven snapped.

"Pepper, and technically, I'm pretty sure you have to set boundaries to have a designated territory. I never crossed any scent-markers," Rainstone mewed, slightly annoyed.

Raven's eyes gleamed, "You got a little attitude, and you better watch it. Most cats here won't stand for that, bet that's why you're travelling alone, bet your family kicked you out," Raven chortled.

Rainstone eyed her with icy coldness, "Your insight is incredible," she mewed in a tightly controlled voice. "But of course, my father isn't here and yowling for my death, so it'd be hard for you to top that," Rainstone added with a bite in her voice.

Raven fell silent, eyes mildly curious while Slate looked a little shocked. "What did you do?" Raven asked, leaning forward, looking like a snake.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Rainstone smirked, casting her gaze away.

"Hmm, well good luck here, hopefully next time we'll have more positive results on the Clan cats," Raven mewed, turning away.

"Oh! Raven, Pepper is going to be sleeping with us tonight," Slate called after her friend.

"What?" Raven jerked her head over her shoulder and then winced, as if it had pulled at a wound. "Can't she clean out her own hole? There are plenty," Raven snapped.

"Nightwing asked me..." Slate mewed, eyes shining hopefully.

Raven rolled her eyes, "Whatever, but she will be kicked out as soon as we get a new cat in here," Raven snapped, padding over to the rock wall and clambering up to one hole that was raised about two

tail-lengths off the ground.

"Hmm, ill-tempered, I like her," Rainstone mewed.

Slate rolled her eyes, "You really got to her, wonder why," Slate shrugged.

Did she recognize me? The thought crossed her mind, but she was sure Raven would have said something if she had. "I'll introduce you to some more cats, look, under by the fresh-kill pile," Slate mewed, leading her into the long, stained shadow of the rock as the sun passed over sun-high.

"Shadow, Niko, Felix, we have a new member. This is Pepper," Slate introduced her. Rainstone faced their gazes steadily. Shadow was an older looking she-cat with lots of scars over a lithe body covered in black fur interrupted only by two sharp green eyes.

Niko and Felix were both toms, Niko was plain black with a red paw and gray eyes. Felix was a tall, scrawny cat with ears too big for him that looked crumpled, accompanied by round green eyes. "Nice to meet you," Niko mewed, his eyes reserved but moderately friendly.

Shadow just glanced at her in a superior sort of way. Felix swaggered over to her, purposefully crossing his long, stick legs so that he almost stumbled with every step. Slate rolled her eyes and Rainstone growled to herself as he pushed in between them and leaned on Rainstone's shoulder, his filthy breath ruffling her whiskers.

"So, ya gonna be a part of the group, huh?" Felix asked, his voice sounding surprising young and high-pitched for his off attitude. Rainstone hated him; he made her think of the cats back in the cave.

"Yes, your welcome has been much appreciated, but I'm leaving now. By-bye," Rainstone mewed, turning away with an irritated hiss on her lips.

"Hold on, just a moment," Felix wrapped his oily tail around her

neck and she turned toward him.

"Yes?" Rainstone purred, blinking big eyes up at Felix. He seemed confused for a moment and she pulled his tail away with a paw, slamming it under her paw and stepping on it.

"OW! Get off!" Felix cried.

Rainstone glared icily in his eyes, feeling the moderately curious stares of the other three cats. She stepped further along Felix's tail, him crying with every step and being forced to sit down until she was standing over him.

"Now, when I say I'm leaving, that means don't talk to me, got it?" Rainstone mewed. Felix whimpered and nodded. "Good boy," Rainstone cooed, stroking his crumpled ear. She stepped off his tail and Felix jumped up and ran a few steps before studying it.

"Well done, you don't seem to deal with nonsense well, hope you can sleep with one eyes open," Shadow commented, stalking lazily over to her.

Rainstone eyed her quietly, "I've over lived like that, it shouldn't be difficult," Rainstone mewed. Shadow shrugged and turned away. Slate skipped up to her.

"What was that?" she hissed.

Rainstone blinked slowly, "He was annoying me, he needed to be taught a lesson," she mewed.

Slate shook her head so hard her ears flapped. "No, no, you can't snap at every cat that annoys you! Just suck it up and deal with it. It'll serve you much better than your attitude now," Slate mewed.

Rainstone rolled her eyes, "How do you know?" she grumbled.

"Because I'm the only one who'll stick it out with Raven. She has no other friends and no one else to depend on. But she can't help it, but I can tell you can," Slate mewed sternly.

Rainstone looked away; the sun was starting to sink behind the top

of the hollow, leaving most of it in shadows. "Where are the other cats, you have more than this right?" she muttered.

"There was a patrol out hunting, they'll be back at any mome-" Slate broke off at a greeting call from outside the hollow.

Four black silhouettes against the fiery sun appeared and Slate skipped to go greet the leader, Nightwing. They touched noses, one affectionately, the other less so. Rainstone studied the three other cats. One was a burly black tom, the tom that had fought with Slate against her and she'd dragged from the water.

Then one was a young she-cat, about apprentice age. The last one's shape seemed oddly familiar... Rainstone couldn't believe it, and she hoped she was wrong. She watched as Nightwing leaped up on the red ledge rock, his fur catching the last scarlet and gold rays.

"Cats! We have found one more prospective addition to our group today. In addition to Pepper, which most of you have already met, we also have found a young tom named Needle, we grow stronger every day!" Nightwing's voice was full of ferocious pride as he called out to the sky.

The cats in the hollow called back their support, Rainstone stayed silent though, eyeing the new-comer, Needle. He moved stiffly as he met the other cats, as if in pain. His green eyes were gleaming in the half-lit shadows and seemed wary but determined.

Rainstone moved forward and grabbed a squirrel from the fresh-kill pile and turning to Needle. "Share with me?" she asked sweetly. Needle nodded warily, sitting down stiffly and was a small gasp of pain.

Rainstone shared the squirrel with him in silence as the other cats feasted and talked. "So, uh, Pepper, you just came here today?" Needle asked, looking down at the squirrel. It annoyed her more that he didn't recognize her.

"Yes," she answered coldly, anger bubbling beneath her pelt. "So... Needle, that black fur of yours... it smells like ash," Rainstone mewed slyly, looking at the black fur that smelled like acrid smoke.

"Oh, uh, yeah, there was a fire from where I was from, that's why I left," Needle mewed awkwardly.

"You are a terrible liar, I'll see you tomorrow," Rainstone mewed with stiff annoyance, getting up and padding over to the hole which Raven had gone into. Pulling herself up the sandy rocks, she scrambled into the hole, surprised by its width in depth.

"So, got in a fight with the new guy?" Raven asked.

Rainstone rolled her eyes, "I'm the new girl, so I don't know how the 'new' part means anything," she mewed curtly, curling down on the moss covered rock.

"So, what bugged you about him?" Raven asked.

"I know him... and I don't know why he's here..." Rainstone murmured, falling into sleep. *I hope he can survive this undercover mission...*

NIGHTWING'S CATS

Nightwing- Black tom with gray paws and brown eyes

Coal- Burly black tom with blue eyes

Shadow- Lithe black she-cat with green eyes

Niko- Black tom with one odd red paw and gray eyes

Felix- Tall, skinny black tom with crumpled ears and green eyes

Soot- Young, black she-cat with dark hazel eyes

Jet- Lanky black tom with brown eyes

Slate- Tiny black she-cat with blue eyes

Raven- Long-legged black she-cat with amber eyes

Pepper- Seemingly odd-shaped black she-cat with dark blue almost black eyes

Needle- Black tom with bubbly green eyes

Chapter 28: Respect Is Key

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"Time for training," the sharp voice woke Rainstone from her dreaming and she jumped to her paws, ducking just in time to avoid banging her head on the rock ceiling of the round hole of a den.

She looked blearily out the hole and saw a young black face, the young she-cat from last night. The she-cat's face was framed by the soft gray light before dawn and her fur looked fuzzy, like that of a little kitten. Her eyes, however, dark hazel, glimmered with unreadable emotions.

"Oh, uh, right," Rainstone muttered, stretching and carefully slipping out of the hole that sloped steeply to the ground.

The she-cat led her over to the trail she had descended yesterday to enter the camp, and sat down, obviously waiting for someone. "What's your name?" Rainstone asked after a tense silence.

"Soot," the cat answered curtly.

Rainstone twitched her whiskers; usually young cats were much brighter than that. "So, how did you come to join Nightwing?" she asked, attempting to strike up a conversation.

"I was a kit, alone, and he helped me," Soot mewed, her voice remote and Rainstone felt a pang of pain. *They treat themselves like a Clan but they are hardly friendly with each other, they're doomed to fail.*

"Bet Nightwing's idea sounded like an easy way to life," Rainstone mewed slyly.

"Oh, what do you know? You don't know what it's like to be rejected by your family and cast out on your own, hardly able to hunt for yourself," Soot snapped, her fur bristling.

Rainstone swallowed hard against the lump of sad misery of memory that flowed through her. "Don't play the martyr, ever cat has to deal with their own problems," Rainstone mewed firmly. Soot huffed and looked away.

"Who are we waiting for?" Rainstone asked after a while. The sun was coming over the horizon and glancing off the rock surrounding the hollow, making it shine like gold dust.

"Coal is coming with Jet, and Nightwing will supervise," Soot mewed curtly.

"Well, where are they?" Rainstone muttered, scratching her ear with a hind-paw.

"You shouldn't be so impatient," Soot scolded.

"Yeah, whatever, they shouldn't wake me up so early then," Rainstone yawned.

"You won't make it long here, Pepper," Soot muttered.

"Not that your attitude is any better," Rainstone scorned.

"Maybe not, but at least I know how to be respectful," Soot snapped.

Rainstone blinked slowly. Did she have respect? She'd never had any reason to respect anyone. All the toms had treated her horribly and then she mostly just had her family whom she loved, which was different from respect.

When she thought of someone deserving her respect she thought of Sunstar and Flickertail, the cats that had helped a stranger like her and cared for her. Did she have to respect other cats? Why? What had they done to earn her respect?

She decided to ask, "Why should I respect a cat I don't know?" she asked, frowning in quiet confusion.

Soot frowned as well and shrugged, "Like you said, other cats have lives as well, and they deal with difficulties and have made their own accomplishments. I'm not saying you have to respect every cat,

but a certain measure of respect is due to most cats," Soot mewed, sounding older then the young fluffy face portrayed.

Rainstone contemplated on that for a few moments. "I guess that makes sense, but I refuse to respect Felix," she added quickly. Soot gave a small laugh and murmur of agreement, and then three cats were heading toward them.

She recognized the lanky tom from yesterday as Jet, and the big black cat that she'd fought as Coal. Nightwing slunk behind them, the gray light shining on his brown paws. "To the training spot," Nightwing ordered, voice clip.

Rainstone fell in behind him as they stealthily climbed the hazardous path. Soot gasped as her paw twisted under a rock and Rainstone unconsciously grabbed her scruff and lifted her over onto a firmer part of the trail.

Soot shot her a grateful glance and then bounded up the last tail-length to the top. Rainstone pulled herself up, eyes taking in the orange shadowed landscape. Dark patches of trees and bushes dotted the rolling green hills and the glimmer of water of small ponds gave a dazzle to the beautiful morning.

Nightwing didn't give her a chance to take it in though as he led them at an easy-lope across the long green grass toward a small-raised hill. Rainstone detoured to brush through a bunch of lilac flowers, the sweet smelling perfume scattering on her fur.

She shivered as her fur became wet from the dew on the grass, but the golden sunlight set the grass sparkling like thousands of little stars hid in the meadows. She turned her gaze ahead as they crested the small hill.

Her eyes widened slightly in surprise to see the hill was hollow in the middle, like a huge, grass-covered ant-hill. The ridge around was less than a tail-length in width and the bottom of the hollow was filled with fluffy, white dandelions.

Nightwing flicked his tail and Coal led them down while Nightwing sat at the top of the hill, looking down on them with a superior

erected look. "Now," Nightwing's voice rang over them, his eyes shadowed from the sun rising behind him.

"First we will do one-on-one, Pepper, you will fight against Coal; Jet, you against Soot," Nightwing called. Rainstone faced Coal on one side of the hollow; glad that she was set against him instead of Soot, the young cat would have a hard enough time with Jet.

She crouched, muscles tense and ready, her tail waving slowly behind her, helping her find her center balance. Coal faced her squarely, muscles bulging under his raggedy black fur. His blue eyes burned and with a roar he raced for her, paws thumping the ground so heavy she was surprised the ground didn't tremble.

Rainstone was used to fighting against Pepper, who had been small and lithe, only slightly taller than her. She knew she wouldn't be able to use her muscle against Coal. Slipping out of the way, Coal turned surprisingly fast and pounced for her.

She shot forward but his paws clasped on her tail and she was jerked to a halt. Using her front paws as a medium, she bucked and hit her back paws to Coal's face, dislodging his grip. Still on her front paws, she swiveled around and rose on her back paws.

Coal copied her, towering over her and swatting back her blows with stronger ones. She winced as he scratched her shoulders; apparently they fought with unsheathed claws. Ducking beneath the flurry of blows, she slid under him and hooked his back legs out, pulling at the knotted muscle that would make him collapse.

He fell sideways and she pounced, dazing him with a couple hard knocks to the head and them rolling him on his back, pushing her claws in his shoulders to keep him pinned. She didn't look up as he snarled and spat, blue eyes growing foggy with increasing pain.

"Enough! Pepper and Jet win this round!" Nightwing's voice broke through her spiked adrenaline. With serious self-control, she retracted her claws and Coal immediately kicked her off of him with a growl, but she landed on her paws and turned to look at Nightwing.

"Now, Pepper, Jet, you fight, then we will move on; Soot, Coal, watch and see if you can learn something," Nightwing's flinty brown eyes stayed on Coal longer and the big tom muttered a curse or two.

Rainstone faced Jet; she had beaten him yesterday, right? While fighting with another cat at the same time above all else. But she had glimpsed his fight with Soot. Somehow, she didn't think they had tried their hardest to beat her yesterday.

Jet crouched low, tail whipping behind him, black fur smoked in gray shadows. His brown eyes were fixed on her intently; he was trying to unnerve her. Unfortunately for him, she'd been through too much to be unnerved by a look.

She stalked, snaking around him, knowing he was keeping an eye on her at all times. She stalked and purposefully made her limp on her dead paw more apparent. For a few moments they were locked together in a game, a game in which they tried to guess what the other was thinking, as if that would decide to outcome of the fight before they even raised a paw.

Rainstone was guessing that he had noticed her limp and would attack her when that paw was facing him, making it easy to tackle her. But he didn't and she realized with crystal certainty that he was waiting for that side to be away from him.

He did it because then her weak side would be on the more uneven ground and it would be simpler to unbalance her, even if he didn't sweep her off her paws on the first go. So, she reasoned, she had to attack first.

Without a flicker in her gaze, she suddenly shot out for him, etching her claws down his shoulder before he could jerk away. He tripped her and she fell on her side, not missing a moment as she rolled into him, tripping him and having him fall on her.

With a few moments of confused struggle, Rainstone managed to grab Jet's black shoulders and with an intense grip, forced him to the ground, jumping on his back and digging her claws into his fur. He shot up and her stomach heaved at the sudden movement, her ears flattening against her head.

She was dazed for a moment and Jet took that moment to grab her good paw between his teeth and pull her off, still with her paw clamped between his fangs. She wanted to cry in pain, as she stumbled to stay on her dead paw.

Twisting desperately, she managed to wrench her paw from Jet's jaws, and placed it painfully on the ground, blood soaking the grass. But she had lost in those few moments of unbalance; Jet pushed her to the ground and stood over her, claws pricking her shoulders and blood dribbling from his mouth, her blood.

"Jet wins!" Nightwing crowed and Rainstone growled resentfully, her paw and shoulders aching.

Rainstone watched unhappily as Nightwing came down to personally congratulate Jet and set him apart from every other cat. Then he stalked over to her, looking menacing and angry.

"What was that?" he snarled.

Rainstone just looked at him silently, remembering what Soot had said about respect. She didn't respect Nightwing, but she had to pretend for the moment at least. "You had that battle! You lose one paw and you can hardly stay standing up?" his voice was coldly scathing.

"She seemed to be limping on that paw, it's probably injured," Soot offered, giving her a quick, sympathetic glance.

"Injuries are a part of life, you can't survive if you cannot adapt," Nightwing snarled, looming over her.

Rainstone met his words with silence and his insults with quiet eyes. Inside, however, she was burning with resentment and a snarl kept twitching on her face. Being respectful was much harder then it looked!

"Well? Are you injured or not?" Nightwing spat after a stream of blatant insults.

"Yes, my paw is dead, I've learned to live with it," Rainstone mewed tersely, her voice sharp like grating stones.

Nightwing narrowed his eyes and peered down at her unbloodied black paw. He poked it with a claw. "You can't feel it?" he asked, sounding interested.

"Not a thing, it comes in handy occasionally, but is also a bother," Rainstone mewed surprised by the change of his tone.

"Well, figure out how to balance on it perfectly and how to turn it into a strength, or I won't be allowing you to stay here," Nightwing turned away sharply.

Rainstone watched him, annoyance flaring through her. She had beaten Coal and he hadn't been lectured! He hadn't been threatened with being kicked out! Why her? Was he suspicious? With a twinge of nervousness, she turned to Jet with Soot and Coal, listening to the next exercise.

...

They didn't head back to camp until after sun-high and Rainstone's fur was smeared with blood and she felt completely exhausted as she finally descended into the rock-made camp. Nightwing headed for his den where Slate was waiting, a piece of prey by her paws.

Rainstone turned and found a quiet spot in the shade. Black cats greeted black cats and Rainstone thought how horribly dull it was that every cat was the same color.

"Rough session?" Rainstone glanced at Raven who had limped over to her to sit in the shade with a sigh.

"Where's Needle?" Rainstone asked instead, she needed to talk to him alone.

"He went out hunting with Niko, they'll be back soon," Raven yawned.

Rainstone eyed her wounds, they smelled horribly and one was oozing puss. "Do you know how to take care of your wounds?" she asked, feeling a little nausea at the horrible stench.

Raven scowled, "Don't you think I would have if I did?"

Rainstone lapped at her own wounds. "I have to go grab some herbs, I could give you come too," she offered hesitantly.

Raven looked at her in disbelief, "But you ar- err, uh, do you know how?" Raven broke off and Rainstone felt a chill. She hoped Raven hadn't been about to say what she thought she had been going to say.

"Yes, my mother taught me," Rainstone lied. It'd take too long to explain the rules of the cats in the cave.

"Oh, well, I won't say no," Raven muttered, wincing as she licked at a scratch on her shoulder.

Rainstone nodded and finished cleaning the blood off her bitten paw; it had stopped bleeding, but still felt incredibly tender. She made her way out of the camp and turned toward one of the nearby ponds. In such a green place, herbs should be easy to find.

She was right and found rich clumps of marigold which she bit off and then swabbed her paw with cobwebs that she found thickly in a dead briar bush. She hobbled back to the camp and with much difficulty made her way down the trail on three paws.

Heading over to where Raven still sat, she rubbed the juice into Raven's wounds. Raven gasped, "That stings!" she snapped, shifting uncomfortably.

"It hurts less than if those wounds really get infected," Rainstone muttered, covering the still open ones with cobwebs. Then she quickly treated her larger scratches and paw.

"Wish I had something stronger," Rainstone muttered as she wrapped her bitten paw in cobwebs. The silvery strands would fall off before long.

Raven eyed her, with a more generous curiosity now. "Where did you live before?" Raven asked.

"I'd rather not talk about my past," Rainstone answered quietly, wondering if she could go get some prey.

"Fine, most cats here won't talk about their pasts either, I guess every cat has secrets," Raven sighed, looking a little wistful.

Rainstone remembered that Slate had said she was Raven's only friend. Feeling a little sorry for her, she turned to her, "Do you want something to eat?" she asked.

Raven ducked her head, "I don't want to eat when I'm not doing any work," Raven muttered.

Rainstone rolled her eyes, "Idiot, there seems to be plenty of prey. Let's share something," she mewed, getting up and stalking toward the fresh-kill pile before Raven could object.

She grabbed a rather large pigeon, she was small so she wouldn't eat as much, and since Raven wasn't doing much, she doubted they'd need anything bigger. Bringing it back, she saw Raven's eyes gleam with appreciation and she fell to the food before Rainstone had sat down.

Rainstone drew back after a few mouthfuls; it had settled her hunger and Raven seemed desperately starved. *Did she even eat last night?* Raven had disappeared to her den after sun-high yesterday and had only come out for a few moments when Nightwing called the cats together.

"Thanks, Pepper," Raven muttered when she finished, sitting up with a sigh of content.

"No problem," Rainstone mewed, nibbling on the few left-over scraps.

"I feel much better, and my wounds don't hurt so much. What did you put on them?" Raven asked, sniffing at her wounds.

"Marigold, but lots of other things can be used on wounds," Rainstone answered, cleaning a few scraps from her whiskers with a paw.

"Well, thanks again, I'm going to go rest now, maybe I'll be able to do more tomorrow," Raven sighed ruefully before getting up and stumbling painfully to her den.

Rainstone yawned and lay down on her belly, her head resting on her out-stretched front paws. She dozed while the heat of the day flowed over her, though she kept cool enough in the shade. The chirping of crickets filled her mind as she dozed and she enjoyed not thinking, just feeling and hearing.

A new murmur of voices roused her and she blinked open her eyes blearily as two black cats came into the clearing. One was smoky black; the other was black and had a red paw. *Needle and Niko...* Rainstone thought, rolling on her side and scratching her head on the ground.

She waited until she deposited their prey and separated, Needle looking around uncertainty. Seeing her chance, she sat up and shook out her fur. She padded toward him, and greeted him, looking him straight in the eye and giving him one last chance to recognize her.

He averted her gaze after a moment and looked around uncomfortably. She sighed, "Come on, I need to talk to you," she mewed, leading him out of camp.

Needle followed her at a safe distance as she headed toward the pond where she had gathered herbs earlier. There was nowhere for an eavesdropper to hide and it was far enough away from camp that any cat exiting or coming back wouldn't hear.

"Okay, *Needle*, tell me the truth. Did you roll in ashes or soot to make your fur black?" she asked scathingly.

Needle's eyes went wide in alarm, but calmed quickly, claws unsheathing. "I rolled in soot."

"Okay, why are you here though?!" Rainstone hissed, fur luffing up suddenly.

Needle took a step back, "I am here to spy on Nightwing and discover his plans. And I can't have you telling Nightwing, Pepper, so I am sorry that I have to kill you," Needle trailed off, he looked sick but determined.

Rainstone cuffed him around the ears, "Fool! Your fur will show through soot, you need to dye it! And you're terribly injured! I don't even know how you walked this far!" Rainstone hissed, ignoring the ridiculous threat. Kill her? Yeah, right. A whole cave-full of cats couldn't kill her!

Needle was looking more and more confused. "How did you know I was injured?" he asked.

Rainstone scoffed, kicking at a small twig. "I stitched you up when you were unconscious."

Needle's eyes widened, "Y-you're RiverClan?" he stuttered.

Rainstone rolled her eyes, "Yes, I'm Rainstone, you may remember me from the gathering," she added scathingly.

Needle's eyes went wide in embarrassment, "I didn't realize you had black fur!" Needle mewed.

Rainstone sighed in defeat; this cat just couldn't catch on to anything unless you told him straight-forward. "No, I dyed my fur black to infiltrate Nightwing's cats. I'm going to stay here for a moon or two and find out everything I can about Nightwing's plan against the Clans," Rainstone mewed.

Needle listened as she recounted her story quickly of how she dyed fur and what Nightwing had told her so far about his plans against the Clans. "Now, I hope you don't intend to stay here," Rainstone scowled.

Needle's fur fluffed up defensively, "Of course I do, and you need my help as well!" Needle mewed.

Rainstone rolled her eyes, she had suspected as much. "Fine, but I'm taking care of your wounds and I'm going to dye your fur black so that you don't jeopardize me. And the best way you can help me is to stay out of my way."

Needle nodded and she rolled him on his side, looking at his belly wound that she'd closed with twine. The skin had closed

remarkably fast and she carefully pulled the twine out. She sighed in relief as it came out whole and with just a few gasps of pain from Needle.

"Now, it's going to be more tender for a while, but it will be able to close completely," she mewed, refreshing all his wounds with marigold and cobwebs, disguising it as best she could.

"Okay, so now for the dye, the pool I used should be just as good, we'll go out tonight and you'll be ready by tomorrow morning," Rainstone mewed, leading him back to the rock camp.

"Okay," Needle mewed, nodding.

Rainstone rolled her eyes, did he agree with everything she told him? "Oh, uh, thanks for helping me, Rainstone," Needle muttered, sounding embarrassed.

"Better call me, 'Pepper,' here," Rainstone sighed, though his appreciation tingled at her paws and she felt an unexpected rush of pleasure. She wasn't thanked very often.

She paused and he walked forward. She eyed him, spying a bit of orange fur beneath the black coating. "But, thanks, Needlepine."

Chapter 29: Ruthless

Chapter 29: Ruthless

"Are you sure we shouldn't go into the camp?" Needlepine asked for the umpteenth time.

"Yes," Rainstone sighed, trying to ignore Needlepine sniffing at his fur. It was the morning after she had made him sit in the black dye pool for the entire night. His fur was glossy black but smelled strongly of pine even after a few washes.

She'd wished they'd been able to let it dry longer, but at least it'd work better than a cover of soot. "Are you sure this will come out?" Needlepine asked, a little worriedly.

Rainstone groaned, out of all the cats in the Clans, why was *he* the one sent here? "Yes, it'll start to fade out after a moon or two," Rainstone mewed.

"So we have that long to do... what exactly?" Needlepine asked.

"You were the one sent here! I just got permission to come," Rainstone snapped.

"They didn't really give me details," Needlepine mewed, shifting uncomfortably and she guessed his belly wound was still bothering him.

"Well, we want to find out their main plan of attack. The little skirmishes they're talking about are hardly damaging. They must have a bigger plan to take over the Clans, more than just a few fights with the rabble they've collected," Rainstone mewed, wondering what the plan was.

"Oh," Needlepine fell silent for a moment.

"So why are we sitting at the top of the camp?" he asked again and Rainstone groaned.

"I told you, if we sneak into camp it'll look suspicious. If we just sit here like we're not hiding anything, it won't look so discreet," Rainstone explained, to her it was quite obvious. Of course, she'd been sneaking to do things all her life while maybe Needlepine hadn't...

"Well, how long until we can go into the camp?" Needlepine asked.

"Until some cat calls us down," Rainstone mewed, confident that she had already told him that.

"Oh," Needlepine mewed, shifting his paws. What was biting him? He obviously wanted to ask her something, but wasn't asking.

"Do you want to know something?" she asked testily.

Needlepine shot her a quick glance, "How did you know?" he asked in a cautious voice.

"You're not very subtle," Rainstone mewed in a tight voice, grating each word out in agitation.

"Oh, well, I just wanted to know where you lived before the Clans. I meant to ask at the gathering," Needlepine mewed, green eyes uncomfortable, but sharply keen.

Rainstone growled, "It remains a mystery," she mewed in a hard voice, giving him a stony look.

Needlepine sighed. "If I tell you about my past, will you tell me about yours?" Needlepine asked.

Rainstone rolled her eyes, "I'm not telling you about my past, not ever. I just want to forget it. But if you want to talk about your past, you might as well, since every cat seems to want to sleep in until sun-high," she growled, looking at the gray streaks of approaching dawn. Lucky and unlucky for them, the guard had fallen asleep.

"Well, for starters, I don't know who my father is. My mother assured me he was ShadowClan, but that he had moved on from her, and no tom ever showed any interest in me or my sister," Needlepine started, his voice turning monotone and his eyes gazing

at the horizon, as if seeing something else. Good story-telling qualities, not that a sappy story was something she wanted to hear right now.

Rainstone gave a resigned sigh and sat on her belly, listening as there was nothing else to do. "My sister, Thistlebranch, you met her, was always better at everything, including getting in trouble," Needlepine went on, a bit of envy crept into his voice, but he seemed to push it away.

"Anyways, through my apprenticeship there was a constant fight with ThunderClan. In the third moon I ended up fighting against the deputy. Obviously, I was defeated, but he gave me a scar at my ear to remind me of my defeat," Needlepine inclined his head and Rainstone saw a half-moon scar encircling half is his left ear.

Rainstone frowned, so what? "Pinefur is a sick cat," Needlepine suddenly snarled. "My mother came to defend me, since I was terribly injured. And he killed her, said it was out of self-defense. But she'd hardly landed two blows when he just snapped her neck like a twig," Needlepine's voice vibrated with fury and his eyes were in green rage.

Rainstone swallowed hard and sat up, laying her tail over his shoulders. She tried to imagine her mother dying for her, it made her heart heave just like it had when her kits had died. "That must have been so hard," she murmured.

"The worst part was that Pinefur laughed at me, he just stood over my dead mother and laughed. I vowed revenge," Needlepine's claws scratched the rock and his shoulders were shaking from emotion.

Why had he made himself go through this to tell her? She just wanted to forget her past; it helped by not thinking about it, why did he tell her and relive it? Rainstone couldn't help herself and pressed against his side comfortingly.

She could understand his pain, but not, at the same time. Her family wasn't dead, the closest cat to her to die was Dusty, and she'd only known her for a quarter moon. But at the same time, she'd lost every cat. She could never see them again, not ever, they

were as good as dead.

"I lost everything I once knew, I know it's hard," Rainstone murmured, twining her tail with his with a tight squeeze of comfort.

Needlepine turned his head away and drew away. "I'm sorry, I'd meant to skip over that," he apologized, looking a little embarrassed for the rush of emotions.

"It's okay; sometimes talking about your past can help. But sometimes it doesn't," she added in a hard voice.

Needlepine dipped his head, taking a few moments to recover himself. When he straightened up she couldn't even tell he'd been spitting hatred, except from the faintest traces of darkness in his eyes. It frightened her; she'd thought he was this happy-go-lucky cat. Was it just a face he put on to try to forget the nightmare he'd lived?

Rainstone's heart ached for him in such intense compassion that she was shocked for a moment. The only cat she'd ever felt for so much before was Scamp... She shook her head; any cat would feel the same. There was nothing special here.

"So... you lost everything?" Needlepine asked, green eyes curious and bright once more. Almost too bright, she noted.

She felt a rush of annoyance, "Yeah and I don't want to talk about it," she mewed harshly.

Needlepine sighed and shrugged and she hoped someone would call them to do something. "Pepper! Come join Shadow and Felix on a hunting expedition!" A voice finally called.

"Okay!" she called back; relief, cool and soft, washed over her. She jumped down the trail toward the two cats, though she rolled her eyes at Felix.

"What were you doing with Needle? Looked intense," Felix asked, green eyes keenly mocking.

"We were talking," Rainstone mewed sharply.

Shadow rolled her eyes, "Come on, we're going hunting, so you need to be quiet. Pepper, we shall also show you the territory," the lithe she-cat mewed.

Rainstone nodded in assent and followed them back up the trail, passing Needlepine without glancing at him. They led her in the opposite direction of the training hill. She spotted a mass of gray stone and sparkling lights in the distance.

"A Twolegplace?" she guessed.

Shadow nodded, "The Thunderpath by the lake runs to it, that's our border on that side. Then on the wild side, it goes up until it changes to a rock field. And then we border the Clan... Fish-Clan or something, and on the last side it goes up until a long stream, just too wide to jump safely," Shadow explained and Rainstone depicted the map.

She knew which stream they were talking about, it was the stream where she'd found Nightwing first wrestling with Willowwater, inside RievrClan territory it was much narrower.

"So... the whole 'showing the territory,' was just a formality," Rainstone mewed, looking around.

"Pretty much, we don't have time to visit all the borders, that's why they're difficult for others too cross... speaking of which, how did you enter our territory?" Shadow asked in a wondering tone.

"I crossed in from Clan territory. Those lazy cats think they keep rogues out, but it's not... per say, challenging, to slink through their territory," Rainstone scoffed, hoping she put the right amount of scorn on the Clans.

From the purrs of amusement from Shadow and Felix, she supposed she guessed right. They settled to hunt in a mini meadow nestled around four sloping, bumpy hills. The meadow was full of bushes and a few scrubby trees that dropped plenty of nuts.

"Pepper, you try here, we'll be around, meet back here at sun-high,"

Shadow instructed.

Rainstone widened her eyes, such a long hunting session! But Felix agreed so she did as well, heading down the meadow in her best stealth walk. She realized as she carefully moved her body silently over the ground, how much easier fishing was. It was a lazy, easy pastime, almost for fun.

She pricked her ears as she spotted a small movement. Dropping low like Flake had showed her back in the forest, she pounced on the creature and found it was a shrew. The meadow was full of little rodents and when the sun was only half-way up the sky she had as much as she could carry, including two squirrels three mice and a shrew.

This is probably enough, she thought, draping the squirrels over her shoulders and grabbing the smaller rodents by their tails. Heading up the hill, she saw, with a surge of frustrated anger, Shadow and Felix lounging in the sun on the hill in a pile of wildflowers. The remains of prey by them told her she saw they had eaten.

Her rumbling belly just added to her anger and, righteously outraged, she threw down her catch and bounded over to them. "Hey!" she snarled, standing over the mildly surprised cats. "I thought we were hunting!" She spat.

"We did," Shadow flicked her tail at the bones of a chaffinch.

"I meant for the cats back at camp," Rainstone seethed. She had spent most of her morning hunting and they were just lazing around?!

"Oh, we caught a few more over there," Felix yawned, gesturing to a tiny mouse and pathetic pigeon.

"Hardly going to feed a cat or two," Rainstone scoffed.

"We have no responsibility to feed any cat else, and we have to rest for today's training session," Shadow sighed, closing her eyes and rolling on her back.

Glaring murder, Rainstone shoved Shadow's belly with a harsh paw.

"Hey!" the older she-cat squeaked, glaring at her.

"Help me carry my catch back to camp then," Rainstone hissed through bared teeth. Shadow looked like she was about to object, but obviously thought better, and she led Felix up the hill where Rainstone had dropped her catch.

"Wow, you caught all this?" Shadow asked, looking confused.

"Yes, I didn't know that 'hunting,' meant, 'being lazy,' here," Rainstone answered in a clip voice.

"Oh," Shadow mewed, understanding Rainstone's annoyance. "Well, you'll know next time, right?" Shadow laughed.

"No, I will always hunt on a hunting expedition, and you had better as well. No wonder Raven almost starved herself; you cats don't care about each other!' Rainstone growled in a low voice, not knowing Shadow had sharp ears.

Shadow didn't respond, although, her green eyes held a flash of guilt. Felix just ignored her and picked up the squirrels while Shadow grabbed the mice and Rainstone grabbed the shrew, also grabbing the mouse and pigeon Shadow and Felix had caught.

Shadow led them back along a tiny stream, hardly a tail-length wide and only a mouse-length deep. But Rainstone liked it; she could see the copper stones beneath the water and the little white ridges around the larger stones.

The babble calmed her annoyance and she was thinking about good things when she heard a screech from Shadow and the she-cat dropped her prey, bounding off with Felix at her side.

Rainstone frowned and followed, leaving her prey with theirs. The two black cats were closing on a small ginger and brown calico she-cat, hardly the age of an apprentice.

"You're on our territory," Shadow snarled, advancing on the little cat, claws unsheathed. The strange she-cat shrunk back with a whimper.

"I-I'm sorry, I'll leave," the she-cat mewed in a small voice.

"Too late," Felix growled threateningly. Rainstone was about to ask what they were doing when Shadow and Felix both lunged at the little cat. Shadow's claws scored across the neck, Felix's sliced the belly.

Rainstone stood, aghast, as the little she-cat let out a gurgling scream, a dark red pool rapidly drenching the fur and brown-green grass beneath the fallen she-cat. Shadow and Felix had already turned to wash their soiled paws in the stream, as casual as if this was normal.

Rainstone rushed to the little cat and without thinking, pressed the grass against the wounds. She stood, her paws desperately aching to do more, horrified at the quick killing action without hardly a prompting. She looked down at the little cat, whose blue eyes were drenched in pain.

"W-why did you kill me?" the cat whispered weakly.

"I-I didn't," Rainstone answered, voice shaky.

The she-cat sighed, eyes clouding over, "Tell my mom I'm sorry for running away..." the she-cat's voice trailed off, head lolling back, shocked and pain-stricken expression frozen on her young face forever. Rainstone could have cried.

"W-why did you do that?" she cried harshly, turning toward Shadow and Felix who were eying her oddly.

"She was trespassing and didn't have black fur," Shadow mewed simply. Rainstone couldn't believe her ears, though she could hear the echo in the voice that told her those were Nightwing's words.

"Weren't you told? Any cat without black fur in our territory is to be killed. Any cat that doesn't do so will be killed by Nightwing, his rules," Felix shrugged, licking his wet paws dry.

Rainstone felt sick, the heavy stench of blood and death in the air. She'd seen death, seen cruelty from the cave. Thought she'd seen it all. But she was wrong, cold-blooded murder based on something

that couldn't be changed... It was even worse then what the toms in the cave were capable of. She'd thought only unstable cats like Fox were capable of this.

Rainstone looked at the limp body of the dead cat at her paws. The blood still leaked out, but it was sluggish, no life behind it, no struggle for survival. It'd all been over in the first moment. The she-cat hadn't even had time to react.

"Do we bury the body? She asked hoarsely, still sick. But she couldn't act weak; she had to figure out what these murders were planning, more than ever.

"Naw, we're near the border, we can throw it over the border and let some scavenger find it," Felix yawned. "You do that, since you didn't help with the killing."

A rush of anger surged through Rainstone and she nodded tersely, picking up the blood-stained body and heading in the direction Felix had pointed.

The she-cat was as light as a feather and she was stubbornly determined to bury her, not leave the body out for a fox to pick over. Lucky for her, the rock field which marked the border was full of muddy earth that made it easy to dig, though the stones were always getting in the way.

She rolled the body in and recalled the she-cats last words. *Tell my mom I'm sorry*... Was there a mother looking frantically for her daughter? She thought of her own mother. Her mother didn't know what happened to her... had she been worried when she disappeared? Had she guessed that she'd escaped?

She sighed as she covered the grave with a heavy heart. Hoping she hadn't taken long. She cleaned her paws of most of the mud, so that the other cats wouldn't know, and headed back to where they'd dropped their prey.

As she expected, Shadow and Felix were dozing, and the small mouse they'd caught was gone. A snack perhaps? "Come on, let's get back to camp before sun-high," Rainstone mewed, struggling

desperately to sound like normal.

The sun was almost at its highest peak as they headed off again, approaching camp just after sun-high. Rainstone was paw-sore and emotionally exhausted after the casual murder.

"Nice catch," Nightwing mewed, actually sounding appreciative. Shadow told him about the she-cat they'd murdered, of how they had, 'valiantly,' struck down the 'impure,' she-cat.

Rainstone made herself eat something, though her appetite had disappeared completely. She spotted Needlepine entering camp with Slate, Niko, and Coal. From their scratched and banged up forms, they had been training.

She got up to go talk to Needlepine about what happened on patrol, she needed to warn him about these cats ruthlessness. But something hit her in the back and a trickle of cold ran through her and she couldn't move for a moment.

She was lying against the warm ground, but felt colder then ice, hardly able to breathe. She groaned and rolled over, disjointed and found herself staring up into the vehemently angry eyes of Nightwing.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Nightwing hissed, claws hooking into the loose fur around her neck and he shook her head until her teeth clacked together.

"What are you talking about?" Rainstone's voice was distant and weak, even to herself, as she was still dazed.

"Lying to my cats?! That's low, and must be punished...so why did you do it?" Nightwing demanded, showing his fangs.

Confusion rolled over Rainstone and she stared up at him, had he found out she was from the Clans? But his words were strange. Though the intense anger he was showing was almost enough to convince her.

She noticed out of the corner of her eye that Needlepine had unsheathed his claws and was looking ready to jump in to defend

her. *Let's hope he doesn't do that, because then we definitely are done for...* She still hoped to talk herself out of this.

"What did I lie about?" Rainstone asked, struggling to sound stronger.

"You told Shadow and Felix you were going to dump that she-cat's body, but you actually buried it. Why? Are you soft?" Nightwing's angry whisper went along with the tightening of his grasp around her neck, making it difficult to breathe.

She coughed, hoping he'd get the hint and relax his grip, but he held on, eyes daring her to say something. "Well?" he hissed, tail lashing, brown paws glistening with blood, her blood.

Rainstone thought fast... she wasn't going to get out of this without ridicule... but she just had to redirect that ridicule. "I hate foxes," she mewed hoarsely.

"What?!" Nightwing snapped, eyes showing disbelief.

"Felix said to leave the body for scavengers, foxes are scavengers," Rainstone mewed in as tough a voice as she could while still drawing in breath.

"And why are you afraid of foxes?" Nightwing's tone was scathing.

"Several reasons, mainly because I knew a cat named Fox who murdered his, 'mate.' And a pack of foxes killed my best friend," Rainstone hissed. She knew it was easier to lie when there was a half-truth. She did hate foxes, but that wasn't why she had buried the she-cat.

Nightwing snorted in disgust, but released his grip and stepped back while she hacked and gasped for air. "Make sure you get over that fear. Fear is weakness. In fact, I think that it's time for another raid on the Clans," his eyes swept over every cat hungrily.

Rainstone slunk to the side and shared an apprehensive glance with Needle. "We will attack tomorrow at dawn!" Nightwing called, cats cheered their bloodlust and Rainstone felt a dark cloud settle over

her mind.

So, already another fight... I had hoped for more time... But now I have to figure out how to fight the Clans without actually fighting them... Well, I did ask for some excitement in my life!

Chapter 30: Falling

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Rainstone breathed heavy in the dew-scented morning. She glanced apprehensively at Nightwing. He'd brought every cat except Raven, who as still recovering from the last fight, and Coal, who was watching the camp.

They stood just inside the ShadowClan border, pines soaring above them and the ground mushy and covered in soaked, prickly, pine needles. Though Needlepine seemed to be relishing in being back in his territory, not seeming to be worrying that they were there to attack his Clan-mates.

Rainstone had thought hard about how she was going to do this. She'd decided that she would fight, defeat at least one opponent, without hurting them much, and then allow herself to be chased off. Hopefully she'd face a cat that would make that believable.

She glanced down at her limp paw; it would be much too easy to use it as an excuse. Too bad Nightwing had ordered her not to let it be a weakness; she wouldn't dare use it as an excuse now. She looked up at the sky; balls of gray clouds swelled the openness, blotting out the rising sun as they waited for the dawn-patrol.

They stood further away from the RiverClan border then where they had attacked last time, obviously not wanting to have a combined Clan force again. Rainstone concentrated on keeping her breathing slow and steady, mentally preparing herself.

She wasn't sure what feelings ShadowClan had against these cats. They very well might kill if they got a chance, and Nightwing would expect her to kill as well. She felt that she had been thrust between two deadly opposing forces.

She cursed under her breath. How in the world had she gotten herself in this situation? *Probably my crazy impulses and desire for*

excitement... One would think I'd have had enough by now...

She pricked her ears as she heard it, just a faint sound in the eerily quiet forest. Chills crept along her spine and she felt again the same jumpy fear from the ghostly cedar forest she'd crossed through once upon a time.

She glanced at the other cats; they were flexing their claws and shifting on their paws in barely refrained patience. They hadn't heard it, yet. But the sound grew steadily louder, and it was clearly the babbling sound of voices accompanied by five sets of paws.

Now the other cats heard it and Nightwing flicked his tail, the sign for them to split and outflank the approaching patrol that was already hopelessly outnumbered. Rainstone had heard the plan; they planned on cutting of the cats' retreat.

She was pressed between Slate and Niko; the two black cats were both shaking in excitement. Rainstone remained still, patiently waiting for the cats to come into view and the plain danger of battle to emerge.

She recognized three of the ShadowClan cats. There was Sunfire, Frogfoot, and Thistlebranch. Rainstone flinched inwardly for Needlepine, having to face his sister; she hoped he wouldn't give himself away. She was likely to go down with him if that came out.

The other two cats was the patrol leader, a silver-blue tom with gray eyes and then a young white she-cat with green eyes, hardly apprentice age it looked. Nightwing yowled the signal and her paws moved in sync with the other cats, swift and silent and deadly.

Rainstone wondered how long this would last. The Clan cats were largely overwhelmed and Nightwing's cats were being trained very skillfully. She didn't go for any cat in particular; just bumped against the fighting cats, making sure she only lightly brushed past the Clan-cats.

Claws gripped her tail and she was jerked to a stop. Turning, she kicked out with sheathed paws at her attacker, Frogfoot. She pulled the tom a little ways away from the group, the slinky murky-brown

tom was hissing at her.

His wide paws lashed out at her, claws unsheathed. Rainstone just retreated until she was out of sight from the other cats. With a fake snarl, she leapt at the tom and tussled with him. His claws scraped her and she bit her tongue to distract her so that she didn't unsheathe her own claws, which her instincts screamed at her to do.

Finally, Frogfoot sent her wheeling away with a well-aimed kick. "Did you really think you could beat me without unsheathing your claws?" he spat, green eyes angry.

Rainstone spotted from the edge of her vision that Jet was staring at her, just waiting to report how terribly she'd done to Nightwing. Swallowing her remorse, she hurtled forward, making sure her unsheathed claws were clearly visible.

Frogfoot snapped for her neck, but she ducked her head and butted his chest, flashing her claws and tearing at his fur, but careful not to catch the skin. Frogfoot stumbled, but lunged for her with a skillful leap and landed on her back.

She fell to her stomach, unable to hold the weight. A strange sensation went through her, even though Frogfoot was claws at her spine, this was too close to *that* position. Frightful emotions sweeping through her, she yowled and flipped Frogfoot off and leapt at the fallen figure.

She couldn't help herself and clawed at his shoulders as she pinned his back to the ground. She stared hatefully into his eyes. "I'll let you go, Frogfoot, but don't *ever* do that again," she snarled. Then she chased him away with a shove; the bloody and dazed tom racing away.

Rainstone turned back to the fight, seeing that Felix and Soot were out of the fight. But thanks to her, so was Frogfoot. She cursed herself and hoped she'd face a tough opponent that could chase her away.

She snarled in frustration as the apprentice faced her, the bloodied

white fur on end. A terrible gash showed over a closed eye and her tail tip was shredded to a mess. Rainstone sighed and batted the cat away, sending her rolling under the paws of Niko, who was then opened up for Sunfire to lunge at him and chase him off.

Rainstone glanced and saw that Needlepine was pinned by Thistlebranch. She tensed but relaxed when she saw neither was seriously hurt and that Thistlebranch had her claws sheathed. A moment later, Needlepine was running off with a pretending angry-looking Thistlebranch chasing him.

Rainstone gasped as a cat barreled into her and she twisted around, protecting her belly, as the cat, the patrol leading blue-gray tom, clawed at her flank. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she swatted at his muzzle, blocking his view and getting free to pull herself to her paws.

Her limp paw trembled and she saw it was bloody. It must have been injured and she hadn't realized it. Snarling, she also saw it was twisted, that's why it was trembling. She could feel the faintest twinges of pain up her leg.

Would it hurt her if she continued using it? Would there be permanent damage? She decided she had to, she couldn't feel the pain much anyways. It'd make it easier.

She dodged as the tom lunged for her. She twisted around and hit his flank with half-unsheathed paws, causing long, shallow scratches. She continued that until the tom looked bloody, but was hardly injured.

She was panting and bleeding from several of his well-aimed blows and guessed this was a reasonable state to be chased away in. The rest of the battle had fallen to one-on-one opponents. If she left now, the Clan cats would win.

Smirking, she purposefully opened herself up as she gave him a sloppy blow to the ear. He grabbed her and thrust her to the ground, standing over her winded form. He lunged down and she saw he was going for her throat, to end it all.

She groaned, she couldn't let him do that. She blocked his bite with her limp paw. Crying a little as she heard a snap; she'd just broken her paw. "Just chase me off," she grumbled, glaring daringly into his surprised eyes.

The silver tom, although looking incredibly suspicious, let her up and then chased her off his territory with a bite to her tail. She skipped on three legs, keeping her limp paw off the ground. She smirked to herself; she hadn't given Nightwing what he wanted. Sure, she'd been beaten down pretty bad for it, but it was heartwarming to know she'd disappointed Nightwing.

Serves him right, his crazy plans will never succeed.

....

"This is outrageous! How could you all be defeated by five cats?!" Nightwing's voice dripped with scorn as he faced his defeated cats.

Rainstone ignored him, licking at her scratches. His anger wasn't as harshly directed at her, as she was one of the last to retreat when they were outnumbered. But cats such as Soot, Needlepine, Shadow, and Felix were getting cursed for them being defeated by a few blows.

"We're sorry, but those cats are incredibly skillfully," Shadow tried to give the excuse. Rainstone turned her head away as the sharp thud of a paw crashed on the lithe cat's head. Shadow hit the ground with a groan, Nightwing clipping her ears with nicks.

Hardly a Clan at all... She missed RiverClan, even if she had been with them for hardly two moons; she just loved how they treated each other like family. She felt a wave of homesickness and felt miserable for a moment, then snapped herself out and continued cleaning her scratches while Nightwing ranted on and on.

"How are we going to defeat four Clans if we can't even defeat one patrol?" Soot's voice was despairing and Rainstone was surprised that Nightwing didn't hit her for doubting him.

"Don't worry about our numbers. We'll get more recruits, and we

already have... allies," Nightwing took on a silky smooth voice.

Rainstone's ears pricked. *Allies? Are there other cats that are helping him?* She looked at him curiously, but he didn't say anything more. She shared a glance with Needlepine, but didn't allow it to last more than a moment.

"Come on, battle training," Nightwing mewed curtly, striding through his injured cats. Rainstone stared at him despairingly, her body ached and her wounds stung, she wanted to put some poultices n them and rest for the rest of the day.

"What about hunting?" she dared to ask, guessing her dream of relaxing would stay dreams.

Nightwing glared at her, but nodded curtly anyways. "Coal, you take some cats out and catch enough for everyone, got it?" he stared hard at the burly tom who sighed and nodded reluctantly.

"Okay, Pepper, Raven, Jet. You're with me," Nightwing mewed, leading the cats out. Rainstone glanced down at her broken paw. She would have liked to point out that she shouldn't use it until it had set properly, but she doubted Nightwing would let her get away with it. With a sigh, she hobbled on three legs behind the other cats.

They made their way to the training hill, it didn't seem as lovely with the overcast skies, and Rainstone began to feel depressed by the weather and the seeming impossibility of her mission.

They went down and Rainstone was pitted against Raven while Nightwing sized up Jet. Her fight with Raven wasn't anything special; they leapt and wrestled on the ground. Rainstone had the superior strength and pinned Raven after a few moments. But she could feel her broken paw worsening.

She glanced up and saw Nightwing was holding a freshly bloody Jet on the ground. He looked up at her, his pelt unscathed and hardly ruffled. "Our turn," he snarled, showing blood-stained teeth.

Rainstone frowned and nodded tersely. They'd fought twice, once

when he'd already been fighting, and the other time it'd been a draw. But she wasn't sure she would have won if he had stayed that night. And now her paw was broken, *I'm so glad I can't feel it.*

She crouched, paws ready, eyes skimming over him, looking for a flex of muscle that he was ready to attack. She hardly saw anything but a black streak as he lunged close to the ground like a snake. She sprang in the air, letting him slide under and past her.

She landed on her paws and turned on her aching paws, eyes searching for him. He'd already moved to her side and she ducked by reflex as he aimed for her ears and she bounced back as he swiped for her paws.

She put some distance between them, eyeing him closely. He hadn't touched her, but she'd not even been able to try to attack him. Swallowing, she guessed that he was faster, more skilled, and stronger than her. But maybe not as clever...

She lunged for him and he leapt for her. She twisted in mid-air so that her back was facing the ground and she used her paws to flash a swipe down his belly. She landed on the ground on her back with a thud. But she didn't miss a step as she used her fall to roll right back to her paws. She grimaced as she rolled over her broken paw.

Nightwing was running for her and she flicked one way, then another, using her more agile form. Nightwing kept after her and grabbed at her back paw, tripping her. She felt he didn't have a strong grip and rolled forward, head-over-tail, wrenching her paw free.

Now she batted at Nightwing who had fallen with her. She slashed his muzzle and had her own ears sliced in return. She snarled, eyes glowering as he grabbed her shoulders with his paws, trying to force her to the ground with his strength.

Rainstone may have been small, but she wasn't weak and even on her broken paw she stayed up, slashing his muzzle again and again as he claws dug into her shoulders. Finally he lurched back, unable to take the repeated hits.

She lunged for him in his moment of weakness and barreled into his chest, throwing him on his back and clawing his flanks with her back paws. Then she didn't know what happened, but after a flash of black she was on the ground with Nightwing on top of her and a deep claw mark over her eye that forced it closed.

"Not bad," Nightwing panted. "But it could be better, keep practicing," Nightwing mewed, getting off of her. Rainstone groaned, and looked at her wretched paw. *Good thing I can't feel it, I have a feeling it'd be unbearable.*

Sighing, she was glad Nightwing allowed her to go back to camp and she stopped at the little pool where herbs grew. She closed her eyes to blink back tears as she pulled a make-shift splint on her paw tight. Pain twisted up along her leg, but no feeling came from her paw.

How the heck am I supposed to know when it's healed if I can't feel it?! Fear of maiming her paw anymore so that she couldn't use it at all tumbled through her as she fixed up the rest of her wounds.

"Hey, Pepper," she turned to see Soot, black fur covered in dust and blood to give a bronze look.

"Yes?" she asked, turning back to tying closed a horsetail stem around a poultice on her back leg.

"Do you know how to treat wounds?" Soot asked, sitting down with a muffled gasp of pain.

"Yeah, I was taught when I was young. It was mandatory and I hated it. But I suppose it is useful," she mewed.

"Do you think you could take a look at mine? They just hurt so much," Soot mewed, sounding miserably in pain.

Rainstone sighed and nodded, licking clean the wounds, which weren't too deep, and using the rest of the marigold she'd gathered on them. "There, if they start to really hurt again, I'll put more on them. But there aren't too many herbs here, so I don't want to refresh it unless it is necessary," she mewed, turning her head away,

feeling exhaustion soak through her like water.

"Thanks a lot," Soot purred, momentarily brushing her muzzle against Rainstone's shoulder. Rainstone tightened, if Soot knew she was a spy, would she be so happy? *Probably not, she* thought with a twinge of regret. They were going to find out eventually.

She looked down at her pitch black paws, they looked like a fuzzy shadow on the ground and she longed for a moment just to see her silky gray fur tinged lightly blue like a stone in the rain. "Are you alright, Rainstone?" Needlepine's soft voice drifted over her and she felt a surge of comfort that she wasn't alone.

"Yeah, just tired," she murmured. "How are you?" she asked.

"I'm fine, I had trouble with the fight today, but I guess exchanging scratches with my Clan-mates is about normal anyways," Needlepine attempted a joke, but it felt hollow in Rainstone's chest.

She could feel him, his fur lightly brushing hers, tail lightly twitching against hers. She looked at the flaming pool, drenched in sunset colors. She could picture a face in it, red and black with shining amber eyes.

Oh, Scamp... How did all our feelings leave? Her eyes felt damp and she realized she was on the brink of crying again. "It's hard when your loved ones leave you, or you have to leave your loved ones," she murmured quietly, feeling the need to say something.

"Yes, but they never leave you completely. In your heart, a piece is always with them so that you can never quite forget them, and they can never quite forget you," Needlepine mewed thoughtfully, eyes sad. She wondered if he was thinking about his mother.

"I guess you're right," Rainstone admitted, glad that she wasn't alone in this trial.

"D-do you want to share a rock hole with me? I feel better around you, safer, to be more specific," Needlepine mumbled, looking away in embarrassment.

Rainstone blinked, she'd been sharing with Slate and Raven, and Needlepine had taken an unused one to sleep in alone. "Alright," Rainstone mewed, surprising herself.

"Thanks," Needlepine sighed in relief, meeting her eyes for a long moment.

"No problem," Rainstone whispered, unable to look away. A feeling stirred in her and she couldn't tell if it was excitement or suspicion. Probably both, she guessed, limping back to the rock hollow with Needlepine.

They shared a quiet meal and then went to Needlepine's hole, which, Rainstone was happy to see, was almost level with the ground and had a large opening covered with moss.

The moss was piled thicker in one corner, probably where Needlepine slept. But she could pull together a lump for herself quickly. Outside, twilight's blue and silver glow had taken over and she watched the shadows, thinking and not thinking at the same time.

Needlepine had fallen asleep in his corner and Rainstone had curled up in her corner. She wasn't sure what it was, but she was shivering, her paws as cold as ice. Unable to fall asleep with her nose as cold as frost, she swallowed her pride and shifted closer to Needlepine.

She was just close enough for their fur to brush and for his warmth to seep into her body. She dozed on and off, feeling strange sleeping close to a tom after so long. Of course, it inevitably brought back thoughts about Night.

She could see him, struggling between right and wrong, taking out both sides of his nature on her, finally falling to the right side, but still with one paw over the line. She remembered their many mating sessions, the conflicted struggle that had blotted out all senses; all except for that last one.

She remembered his clever plan of how to rescue her, even though it meant he'd never see their kits. *He gave me up, because he truly*

loved me... Why couldn't I have loved him more?

She sighed, unconsciously shifting closer to Needlepine in search of more warmth and comfort in her cold and lonely thoughts. Finally she realized that her heart longed to love again, longed to fully move on.

But I can't do that again... I can't fall for another cat, not after Scamp rejected me after saying he loved me. But, she knew, she had fallen into this pit of madness in the Clans. *Maybe it'd be nice to fall in love again... Not that a cat necessarily chooses who they fall for...*

Chapter 31: Missing Parts

Chapter 31: Missing Parts

"Hurry up! You're going to get left behind!" Rainstone called testily. Her call was muffled by the rabbit she held in her mouth as she glanced at the trailing Soot who stumbled under the weight of her squirrel and pigeon.

"I'm coming!" Soot called back, making an effort of walking fast enough to keep up with the taller cats of the hunting patrol.

It was Rainstone's first time leading one, and she had already spent energy trying to teach Soot, Coal, and Niko how to hunt properly. None of them had really picked it up, but they'd improved enough to get a respectful catch.

She glanced down at her broken paw, wrapped and pulled tightly together. Almost half a moon had passed since the fight, and she was wondering how long it'd be until it would be safe to take the splint off. *Better leave it on for a moon or two, especially since I'm still using it.*

Even though she was grateful that she could use it without any pain, she wished she could feel it a little, just to judge how well it was healing. But no, she'd have to guess on how long it lasted before it made her entire leg hurt. It had hurt a lot while hunting.

She picked her way carefully into camp, nodding at the other cats as she dropped her catch. "Well done, you can rest for now, we have a visitor coming later, so make yourselves presentable," Nightwing snapped from his usual spot on top of the cleft rock that jutted over the clearing, or Cleft Rock, as it was named by the cats.

Rainstone pricked her ears, but didn't ask any questions as she grabbed a mouse and went to join Needlepine. "How was training?" she asked, they'd been fortunate to not face each other in training, but Rainstone knew it'd happen eventually.

"Fine, I guess," Needlepine mewed, glancing up at her quickly before lowering his eyes to a freshly red cut.

Rainstone sighed and looked away, "Hunting was fine as well, thanks for asking," she mewed with both annoyance and teasing.

Needlepine groaned, "Sorry, it looked like you made an impressive catch," Needlepine mewed, looking at the now bulging pile.

"Yeah, so, what do you think of the new cat?" Rainstone asked, angling her ears at Nightwing's newest recruit.

"He's okay, bright-hearted and generous. I have a feeling he won't pass Nightwing's expectations of killing," Needlepine sighed. Rainstone turned her eyes on the young black tom. He was tall, almost gangly looking, and was about her age, maybe younger. He had sleek fur that was neither long nor short and dim gray eyes that were ironic to his nature.

"Shame he had to get caught up in this," Rainstone mewed.

Needlepine shrugged, "His choice," he grumbled, tearing at his shrew.

Rainstone glanced at him sharply; his faded black fur was bristling defensively. She knew he couldn't care less for cats outside the Clans, and she had to try hard not to let it get to her. "I wonder who the visitor is," she mewed, looking around the ridges of the hollow.

"Dunno, hope it's something important that we can take back to the Clans. We're running out of time," Needlepine grumbled in a low tone.

"I know, I know. I've got it mostly worked out, I'm just missing one piece," Rainstone mewed, looking down at her own black fur. It hadn't started fading like Needlepine's yet, but it would before long. All the rain the days before had only hastened the process.

"What piece?" Needlepine asked. He hadn't been much help, as she had been the one that had eavesdropped on conversations while he tried to forget all his battle training from the Clans; as to not let Nightwing, his former Clanmate, figure out who he was.

"I'll tell you when I find it," Rainstone mewed firmly, glaring at him slightly.

"Alright, okay, I get it," Needlepine mewed, getting up and pulling away with an exasperated look. "You take care of it on your own, whatever, I'm just here to do nothing," Needlepine mewed with mock assurance.

"Oh shut up and sit down before some cat wonders what's wrong with you," Rainstone mewed, pointing at his unfinished meal.

"Yes, oh mighty one," Needlepine mewed with a bow. Rainstone had to giggle in spite of herself.

They finished their meal in silence and then groomed their fur clean and sleek. Rainstone carefully licked around her wrapped paw and kept glancing at the edges of the hollow.

The sun started to slide behind the rough ridged rocks around the hollow, and the light turned blistering red and orange, turning the sandy-red rocks crimson and bronze. Then she heard it, just a light titter of a small pebble falling down the rocks.

She jerked her head up and saw the silhouettes of three cats against the last visible scratch of red sun over the hollow wall. She got to her paws and stood silently as they climbed down and entered the camp. She didn't recognize any of them, but Needlepine started breathing fast besides her.

Two of the cats were black, a tom and a she-cat, but the leader was a copper-brown tom with green eyes and a light of authority, he also carried a familiar scent. Rainstone breathed deeply and realized he had a similar scent to the strange one Scamp had attained.

"Who is that cat?" she murmured to Needlepine under her breath.

"That's Pinefur, ThunderClan's deputy," Needlepine breathed, hatred and fury vibrating in the low words.

"Oh?" Rainstone mewed quietly, stifling a purr. She had just found her missing part.

"Yeah, remember? I told you about him," Needlepine, barely repressing his anger.

Rainstone frowned and looked at him sternly; he was glaring at Pinefur, though the tom seemed totally unaware. "Stop it, he may have killed your mother, but now isn't the time to get him, stop glaring and look your part. Also, don't make eye contact with him, he may recognize you if you do," Rainstone mewed quietly.

Needlepine continued glaring for a moment before nodding and taking a step back, dropping his gaze to his paws. Needlepine back under control, Rainstone studied to two black cats that accompanied Pinefur.

The tom was small and short, but rather stout looking. The she-cat was tall and windy, with a stub for a tail. They both had matching amber eyes that made Rainstone think they were kin. They carried a peculiar scent, Rainstone thought it smelled of stone and water, maybe a little mud. It reminded her of the cave back in the mountains and sent a prickle of longing pain shivering through her.

Rainstone watched as Nightwing came to greet the cats and she moved forward along with all of the cats in the rock hollow. "Pinefur, Screech, Swoop, pleasure to see you again," Nightwing mewed in a calm, polite manner.

"The same, Nightwing. You seemed to have added a few cats since I last visited," Pinefur mewed with a tiny sniff of disproval.

"Yes, Pepper, Needle, Crow, come meet our allies," Nightwing demanded. Rainstone stepped forward with Needlepine right behind her, still avoiding Pinefur's eye contact. The new young tom jumped up beside her and eyed the other cats rudely.

"Looks like you've got a bunch of fleabags," Pinefur growled and Crow jerked back, insulted.

Pepper stared at him levelly, "I fear how terrible your cats are then," she mewed in a silky soft voice.

Pinefur glared at her and then whipped out a paw, aiming for her

ears. Rainstone flicked her ears back against her head and jerked her head down, seeing his other paw move for her cheek. She grabbed it with her teeth and held it for a moment, staring hard into Pinefur's sickly green eyes.

"Satisfied?" she asked pleasantly, spitting his paw out of her mouth.

"Hmm..." Pinefur rumbled, rubbing his bitten paw. "Not too shabby, you've got at least one winner anyways," Pinefur turned back to Nightwing and Rainstone guessed she'd been dismissed for now.

She turned away with an uneasy shiver; she didn't like the look in Pinefur's eyes. It wasn't like the cats in the cave, not lustful, but it was... different. She pulled Needlepine away as Crow stomped off, muttering obscene words under his breath.

And I thought he was such a nice cat... She shrugged to herself and looked quickly to see Pinefur and Nightwing going into Nightwing's den while the two black guards sat outside, their cold eyes flickering over every cat.

"I'm going to go hear what they're saying, make sure no cat comes looking for me," Rainstone murmured under her breath. Needlepine nodded tersely but his eyes were focused.

Rainstone yawned and stretched luxuriously, looking around nonchalantly to see who was still out. Most cats had gone to their dens, obviously unfriendly feeling toward Pinefur. But she noticed Raven, Slate, and Jet were still out, talking in low murmurs and shooting fugitive glances at Nightwing's den.

If they keep looking in that direction it'll be too easy for one of them to spot me. She thought with a sigh and hoped Needlepine would go over and distract them for a while.

She turned to the rock wall and started making her way around the hollow, creeping through the black shadows of the fading light and creeping silently behind the Cleft Rock. There was one spot where she wouldn't be able to hide behind fallen rocks and would be in the open for the short tom to spot her.

Pressing herself to the ground, she slowly crept forward with caution and winced as she twisted her broken paw on an uneven stone. Trying not to hiss out loud in pain, she shot forward like a snake and was safe behind a crook where the Cleft Rock met the rock hollow wall.

Steadying her breathing, she listened for a moment to make sure no cat had spotted her, and sighed when she didn't hear anything. Now she pressed her ear to the rock and closed her eyes, concentrating hard on the sounds from inside the cave.

She couldn't hear things clearly, but she did hear something that sent shivers down her spine. "Clan's worth of cats... trap them on the Island... take hostages... two moons from now..."

Shivering slightly, Rainstone pulled away, she had heard enough. Now she and Needlepine needed to get away without suspicion. *No, first, get out of here without being spotted*, she told herself firmly.

She poked her head around the corner, twilight had fallen and blackness had swallowed the camp, but she spotted the flash of amber eyes and heard a growl. *Dang it! I have to get out of here quickly!*

Fear and adrenaline pulsing through her, she eyed the vertical rock wall. There were little or no paw-holds, but the rock was rough and scratchy, she could do it if she moved fast. Keeping her claws sheathed, she leaped up, aiming for where it bent in a little and clung on with her legs and paws shaking from strain.

Her broken paw sent pain rocketing up her leg and she felt sick for a moment before she swallowed it and pushed upward. There were more shouts from below and she saw the two guards looking up at her, Nightwing and Pinefur coming from behind.

Now, before they recognize me.... Oh no, my scent is still there! Hissing in frustration, she gained enough energy to leap to the top and then she took off at a sprint, heading for the Twolegplace. She supposed they'd guess she'd head for the Clans.

She came to a halt at the first rock wall of the Twolegplace, she was

out of breath and her lungs burned while her legs were so shaky she didn't know how they were supporting her. She looked behind her, after reaching the top of the hollow, they had seemed to lose her, but surely her scent wasn't that weak, was it?

Well, if they're not after me, I can rest tonight. Who knows, maybe they didn't even realize it was me, or maybe they didn't realize my intent... But even to her it sounded ridiculously optimistic, her scent was there, plain as day, and because she ran away, it wouldn't be too difficult to conclude she had a dangerous intent to them.

Shaking her head at her own idiocy, she leaped up the wall, scrambling over with pants and hisses, and dropped down into a dirty puddle of water. She looked at the foul smelling water in disgust, and she had thought forest water was bad!

She walked forward down the dark alley, black, gray, and yellow were the colors that she was surrounded by. For a moment, she felt like she was in a dirtier, harsher, mountain. The stone beneath her paws was full of sharp little stones and was smoothed by mud.

Looking around, she didn't spot anything, and the scents were too bizarre to try to distinguish anything. *I could be ambushed and I wouldn't even know until they had their claws at my throat*, she thought with frustration as she turned into another dark alley.

I'm exhausted, I've got to find someplace to sleep, and if I keep wandering around, I'll get lost in this labyrinth! She sighed and looked around for a suitable place to lie down. Her gaze was drawn up and she peered at the midnight sky where only a few speckled stars showed through.

Is Song one of those stars? Still watching me? She swallowed hard, she missed the ancient black cat desperately, she hadn't seen her in moons and she wondered if she ever would again.

But then she spotted something, almost like it'd been mapped out for her. She could see it; she could leap on the foul-smelling silver can, from that to the tall brick wall, and from that onto the top of the four-walled structure next to her and sleep in safety above the ground.

Steadying her muscles, she leapt onto the can, it shook but held firm. Breathing out slowly, she eyed the rock wall and leaped. It was wide enough for her to stand comfortably on and she walked across it to the edge of the roof which was about a tail-length above her head.

She jumped up, her paws touching something that was both rough and bouncy at the same time. But it was dry and fairy clean. Making her way up the short slope, she curled down tiredly in the shelter of a stone pillar, her bones thanking the rest and shutting down immediately.

Hmm.... I'll figure out what to do tomorrow. I'll just rest for now.

...

"Can't... move... now... claw... off." Rainstone groaned as voices pounded against her ears and dragged her out of her comfortable sleep.

"Hey, I think she's *finally* waking up. Come on, girl, get up," the harsh voice continued and something prodded her side.

"Don't wanna move, too tired," she yawned in response, curling together tighter.

"Now see here, you better get moving before we move you ourselves," the voice growled.

Rainstone popped her eyes open and glared at the speaker, who didn't at all match the voice. It was a small white tom with an ear ripped in half and frayed whiskers. "Who are you?" Rainstone growled.

"I should be the one asking you, lucky duck, you just escaped being seen somehow, the gang walked on the other side of the chimney and they would have killed you before allowing you to wake up," the tom growled.

Rainstone shivered at the thought of the near danger, even if it didn't feel real as she hadn't been aware of it. "Okay, okay, I needed to get moving anyways," Rainstone yawned, stretching and

stumbling onto her paws.

"Good, come on, we got to get out of here fast," the tom mewed, turning and Rainstone spotted a young gray tabby she-cat looking around with alert ears, obviously the look-out.

"Who are you?" Rainstone asked again, jumping down on the rock wall she'd used to get onto the roof last night.

"Name's Jump, that's Mira," Jump mewed, glancing at her with sharp green eyes. "She's my mate, so don't get any ideas," he growled.

Rainstone coughed on her laughter, "I'm afraid I don't understand," she mewed.

"Just because I bothered to help you, doesn't mean I'm looking for you to be my mate," Jump growled.

"Don't worry, I think I'll be fine without being your mate, thank you," Rainstone mewed.

Jump glanced at her and then at Mira, "Why are you here anyways? I've never seen you before," Jump mewed.

Rainstone shrugged; "Running, now I need to get back to the lake..." she *halted. Oh my gosh! I totally forgot about Needlepine! He's totally helpless, he can't do anything! He'll get caught for sure if I don't get him out of there quickly!*

Sucking in a breath she looked around, "Can you take me out of here? I have to go see a friend," she mewed almost without conscious thought.

Mira looked at her with friendly amber eyes, "What kind of friend? Oh, it is *that* kind of friend," the she-cat purred playfully.

Rainstone scowled, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, it's obvious that you care about this cat a lot, do you two have kits?" Mira asked, pressing up beside her.

"What are you talking about? He's just a friend, if you could call him that, he's more of a nuisance than anything else," Rainstone huffed, but she couldn't help but feel a twinge of longing... longing, for what?

"Eyes don't lie, they say that you care about him an awful lot, when did you first meet?" Mira asked.

"First of all, the only reason why I care about his well-being is because what he knows could be damaging to me. Second, I only first met him two moons ago," Rainstone growled, wondering how she wasn't annoyed with this cat yet.

"But that's plenty of time to get to know some cat," Mira mewed.

"Let's not talk about this anymore," Rainstone mewed, looking around the gray shaded alley. Clouds covered the sun and the light was pale and faded, giving a dismal outlook.

"Okay, we're almost there," Jump mewed, leaping over on a rather high rock wall. Rainstone recognized it as the one she first scaled last night. Rainstone watched Mira scramble to the top, Jump helping her up the last bit. Rainstone jumped, her front paws hooking over to the top and she managed to pull herself over.

She grumbled and readjusted the splint on her broken paw; she highly doubted this was good for it. "What's with that paw?" Mira asked.

"I broke it a while ago, it hasn't finished healing," she grumbled.

"Oh, well, I guess we'll be saying goodbye here," Mira mewed, looking slightly disappointed.

Rainstone dipped her head awkwardly, "Thanks for showing me the way out, good luck to you two," she mewed.

Jump nodded and Mira purred, "It looks like you'll need luck as well. But what was your name?" Mira asked.

"Oh, it's Rainstone, but please don't use it around here. Also, I'd advise you don't go over there," she waved her tail at Nightwing's

territory.

"We've heard some rumors, and we were planning on heading away toward the beach, who knows, maybe we'll meet again," Mira mewed pleasantly. Rainstone purred in return, and found she didn't find it impossible that they would meet again.

"I'll wait for that day, but I've got to fix in some missing parts," she mewed, turning her gaze to where she knew Nightwing's camp lay, even though it was hidden by hills and trees. Her heart jumped in her chest and energy rushed to her paws.

I'll find you Needlepine, and maybe Mira's right... maybe you are the missing part to my heart...

Chapter 32: Escapade

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Rainstone slipped between the bushes, rocks, and other stunted objects on the hills. Once she had run through here with almost a carefree lightness, now every muscle was alert for possible danger.

But all was silent as she slowly made her way back to Nightwing's camp that was nestled in the rock hollow. She hoped that no cat had connected Needlepine to being her accomplice, but her heart sank at how unlikely that was.

They were always talking, sharing meals, and they had even shared the same den. If they were going to ask any cat for answers, it'd be him. For the first time in a while, she thought of her dead kits, she hadn't been able to save them, but she could help Needlepine.

Her heart ached and her eyes yearned to see his laughing green eyes framed by fading black fur. He just made her feel happy and loved; she could almost forget her nightmarish past when she was with him.

Now she was approaching the rock hollow and she could hear loud, angry yowls. She sniffed the air and let her gaze run across the flat area. She couldn't see any cat and the smell of anger and fear was definitely concentrated in the rock hollow.

Steadying her breath, she sniffed at her fur which smelled of crushed flowers, she'd made sure to mask her scent before coming here. But hiding while spying down would be a difficult task, as the hollow rim was bare and any figure could be seen against the cloudy sky.

Lucky for her, it was sun-high and with the clouds there were little or no shadows. She sucked in her breath and, flattening herself to the ground, slithered to the edge of the hollow, keeping her ears pressed against head, trying to make herself as small as possible.

She peered down and narrowed her eyes. Nightwing and Pinefur were murmuring together under Cleft Rock, while a circle of black cats had surrounded Needlepine, yowling and jeering.

Rainstone swallowed, throat tight, he was scratched and battered and his fur looked ragged. But he faced the cats with a stolid expression and seemed oblivious as they clawed at him and insulted him. *Gosh, they found him fast, though; I hadn't expected him to be able play the situation to his own advantage anyways.*

She felt a rotten mirk on her face at his ignorance; he had no idea how to deal with this. He was a warrior, honor and truth were his light and he didn't know how to play in the shades of gray. He just couldn't even imagine playing cats to his advantage, it was sweet, in a naïve way.

But now she had to figure out how to get him out of there. Her mind was already planning it out as she watched Nightwing and Pinefur face Needlepine, stone-cold expressions on both faces.

"Where is she?" Nightwing snarled, slamming his paw brutally against Needlepine's left eye. Rainstone winced; he was getting beaten, for her. It would have been more touching if she wasn't racked by guilt.

"I don't know," Needlepine answered steadily, seemingly unnerved.

"Liar!" Pinefur spat, slamming his paw on top of Needlepine's head so hard that his chin hit the ground.

"I am not lying," Needlepine mewed, blood dripping out of his mouth and staining his black fur red.

Rainstone wriggled uncomfortably, in front of Needlepine stood a former Clan-mate and archenemy, how long before they recognized him and really started getting into it? In fact, she was surprised they hadn't recognized Needlepine yet. *Did changing his fur really do so much? I guess he would have been younger last time they saw him as well... but still.*

"Why did Pepper run away? What was her intent?" Nightwing

growled, glaring at Needlepine through a flinty gaze.

"I'm not sure," Needlepine mewed hesitantly and Rainstone pricked her ear, than dropped them again.

"What do you *think* was her intent?" Pinefur growled, leaning closer.

"She was always wondering what the point of this all was, so I guessed she just wanted to find out," Needlepine lied so smoothly Rainstone couldn't help but be impressed. *Maybe he isn't so helpless...*

"So you mean to tell me it was just innocent curiosity? Then why run away?" Nightwing's tone was scathing and Rainstone hoped he had some reasonable answer.

"Look, I don't know!" Needlepine's voice took on a wail. "I want to know just like you, my guess was that she either didn't like what you have planned, or she got scared that she would be in trouble. You did have two guards with you," Needlepine mewed, looking like he was struggling to keep himself together.

Wow, he's pretty good at acting! Now why couldn't he have just made this simple and run when I left? She sighed and watched to see it play out.

"Just a quick question, are you two mates? I mean, you were always together..." Pinefur eyes gleamed in amusement.

"N-no, she wasn't ready for that yet," Needlepine sighed and Rainstone rolled her eyes.

"Oh, come on, you just got to push her a little," Pinefur's fangs gleamed and his eyes had become distant. Rainstone wondered how he had gone from interrogator to acting like a friend in a few seconds.

"Hmm... Well, I'll see about that if I see her again, but honestly I don't know," Needlepine shrugged.

Pinefur just snorted and murmured a few things to Nightwing that Rainstone couldn't hear. "Last question, do you know where Pepper might head if she left?" Pinefur asked, voice calm and friendly.

Rainstone knew he was just trying to get Needlepine to trust him more and tell him more, *not happening*.

Needlepine tilted his head to the side and seemed to think for a moment, "She often talked about going back to the mountains where she was born," he mused quietly.

Pinefur glanced at Nightwing who nodded and then Nightwing murmured something to his cats. Rainstone barely had time to dive for a bush before a patrol, Jet in the lead, raced past her, heading in the direction she would have taken for the mountains.

Rainstone waited a while and then cautiously made her way back to the hollow rim. As the sun dipped deeper and the light started to fade, more cats seemed to be going to their dens.

Needlepine still stood with Nightwing and Pinefur with a few scattered cats around them, one being Raven. "We'll keep you under guard until Pepper is back and dealt with. Sorry, but it has to be this way, we can't have you sneaking out to meet your lover," Pinefur explained in the most charming and apologetic way. Rainstone felt disgusted.

Needlepine dipped his head in agreement, as if he had been expecting this. "Of course, but what happens if she's escaped you?" he asked, eyes glinting meaningfully.

Pinefur just laughed a short, hard, mean laugh. Then the ThunderClan deputy turned away. "My Clan will be missing me, so I have to go," he mewed quietly to Nightwing. "But send me word when this, 'Pepper,' is killed. But even if she gets away somehow, I bet we've seen the last of her," Pinefur mewed.

Nightwing nodded and then waved his tail at Slate, putting her in charge of guard duty for Needlepine. Then the faded black tom was escorted to his den and Slate sat outside, eyes and ears alert.

Needlepine paused and looked up at her. She blinked twice, slowly, hoping he could read her message. *I'll get you out of here, and soon*.

...

Rainstone spent that evening carefully masking her scent as she hunted and deciding on how exactly she was going to get Needlepine out without alerting any cat to her presence. *Well, that's probably going to be impossible, since there's a guard outside Needlepine's den...*

Twitching, she mapped out the route in her mind and sighed as she realized that it was dependent on luck. *Okay, Song, I could really use some luck right now.*

Creeping back to her bush that was near the hollow, she waited for the black and blue shadows to settle over the land and turn the hills into a shadowed land. Lucky or unlucky for her, the clouds had rolled out with dusk so that the rather round moon shed its silver light.

Sighing and pressing her luck, she crept to the edge of the hollow. The patrol that had left to find her hadn't returned and she hoped they wouldn't until she was long gone. Inside the hollow, the rocks were deserted except for the lone figure of Slate guarding Needlepine's den.

Gosh I hope he's not asleep, she thought with a twinge of apprehension. It was almost time... almost. She could tell it wasn't time; that her escapade wasn't quite set yet. And then she saw why, a figure moved, long and low. It was Felix, obviously waiting to catch her.

Now I know where he is, I can take him out, hopefully quietly. She thought as her heart fluttered in her chest. They made one sound and she was done for, they'd kill her. She'd seen how they had killed the orange kitten; they wouldn't mind killing a former comrade.

She could see Felix was crouched by a rock, eyes scanning the top of the hollow above where Needlepine's den was. It was just too easy. He was hiding, so Slate wouldn't see a thing. He'd be dead by Moonhigh. But she hesitated; did she really need to kill him?

I'm just escaping, no need to go out of my way to kill him... As much as she hated him, she'd let him live as long as he didn't cause her

trouble. Shaking her head at her own softness, she started making her way down the hollow silently.

It was less difficult then she had thought, even with a broken paw, she was able to slide from one paw-hold to the next, as silent as a shadow ever was. She stopped on top of the large boulder that Felix was pressed again, his black fur molding with the black shadow.

Closing her eyes and sheathing her claws, she saw in her mind how the brief struggle would go; and then put it in action. It was quite simple really, she dropped down like a hawk onto his back, slamming his face into the ground and muffling any sounds he could make.

Then she wrapped her arms around his neck, slowly suffocating him until he passed out, turning from a wriggling fish to a heavy deadweight. She waited to check to make sure his heartbeat was still going strong before pressing him up against the rock, so that it would look like he was still awake and on duty.

Then she turned and climbed back up the wall, circling around to the side rim above Needlepine's den. She slid down, her paws catching on the grainy stone. She planned on doing the same to Slate as she had done to Felix. It was just harder since Slate had always been nicer.

Come on! Get over it, they're your enemies! Hardening her mind, she dropped down on Slate and did the same as she had done to Felix. Except that she caught Slate's wide, frightened eye and it made her heart quiver.

"I'm not going to kill you, I'm just leaving," Rainstone whispered her regret as Slate's eyes rolled back and she was out.

Sighing her guilt away, she turned to the den and saw Needlepine sitting still and ready, his eyes fixed on the entrance. He jumped up and out of the den as he saw her and she signaled with her tail for him to start climbing.

Needlepine clawed his way up and Rainstone gritted his teeth at the noise of claws scraping against rock, how no cat was waking up she

didn't know. She followed him, claws sheathed and silent as she reached the top of the hollow, panting in exertion.

"Okay, let's go," Rainstone murmured to Needlepine.

"Go? Go where?" Needlepine asked and his voice was slightly louder than a whisper.

"Shh! We're going back to the Clans, dummy. Where else?" she hissed.

"But we don't know when they're going to attack!" Needlepine hissed stubbornly.

Rainstone glowered, glaring at him. "I wouldn't be leaving if I didn't know," she snarled. Needlepine looked shocked and then hurt.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, obviously offended.

Why did I come back to save you?! She wanted to hiss it but stopped herself, "I'll explain later, let's go!" she spat and bounded off in the direction of the Clans.

They raced over the green hills towards the Clans. The night air, the chirring cicadas, the flash of fireflies, it was a perfect green-leaf night. Rainstone would have loved to stop and enjoy it, rolling in the grass and sighing in the warm air. But her heart beat rapidly and her paws wouldn't stop moving and she could barely give a passing thought for the loveliness.

Rainstone crested a hill and paused, Needlepine at her flank. Just down the slope the ground turned to a mossier and shorter grass landscape that was dotted with lichen covered boulders and elegantly swaying willows.

Rainstone was surprised at how homely it looked, even though she'd lived with RiverClan for hardly more than two moons, she loved the land so much. The babble of a stream flowed like beautiful song through her and she could picture a moonlit water path leading back home, clearer then crystal and softly playful like a little kit's clumsy paws.

With a renewed burst of energy, she rushed toward the border, smelling the silky smell of RiverClan. Just as she was stepping over the border she felt a rush of air and a shadowy figure coming toward her.

Instinctively she dropped to the ground and rolled away, but Needlepine obviously hadn't reacted quickly enough and ended with his chest being pinned to the ground and his face crushed into the ground.

"Needlepine!" she gasped, turning and wondering with dread if they had come so close just to fail here.

But there was simply one cat; a long-legged she-cat with sharp amber eyes that flashed red in the shadows. Rainstone swallowed, it was Raven. *Is she here alone? Or are there more in the shadows just waiting for me to make a break for it and end it all?*

"I thought you'd come this way," Raven mewed, her eyes betraying no emotion as Rainstone sized up the fight. She sniffed the air and found she couldn't detect any scents other than hers, Needlepine's, and Raven's. But they may have disguised their scents like she had...

Needlepine was panting and shifted his face so that they could lock eyes. His green eyes were unusually serious and she knew he was depending on her to get him out of it. Rainstone swallowed and took up the challenge, hardly thinking he could do more for himself then let her handle it. He was in no position to handle it.

Rainstone breathed deeply and looked at Raven, "What are you going to do?" she asked steadily.

Raven blinked slowly, "Depends. You should know that no cat sent me here, I'm not expected to have caught you, no other cat would know if you killed me," Raven mewed.

Rainstone blinked, hiding her surprise. Raven was openly making herself vulnerable, was it a trick to make Rainstone lower her guard? Rainstone made sure to stay on tiptoe and kept her ears swiveling around for sound.

"Why would I kill you?" Rainstone asked, deciding to play it safe.

"I don't know. I don't understand why you cured my infected wounds. It would have killed me naturally, but you stepped in and helped me. Why would you do that? When you were the cat that gave me those wounds in the first place?" Raven's tone became flinty and Rainstone's heartbeat sped up again.

She closed her eyes briefly, *she did know, she always knew... but why didn't she tell Nightwing?* "I wasn't lying," Rainstone mewed.

Raven scoffed, "Riiight... I knew exactly who you were the moment I saw you, I was surprised Nightwing didn't recognize you... And I still wonder how you changed your fur color," Raven mused quietly.

"I know more than a few tricks. And I wasn't lying, I really am from the mountains and I did wish to be called Pepper," Rainstone mewed sincerely.

"Why Pepper?" Raven asked steadily, still holding Needlepine down.

"It's my brother's name," Rainstone answered the question, thinking wildly what exactly Raven was trying to do.

"But you never answered my real question, why'd you save my life? I'm your enemy, I always was. Why save me?" Raven pressed and her eyes widened and Rainstone knew she really wanted to know.

But Rainstone hesitated, why had she saved Raven? She just hadn't been able to see another cat die like Dusty... hadn't wanted that memory to come up. She winced now, thinking about Dusty twisting in exhausted agony, unable to fight off the infection like she had fought off the foxes.

"Why didn't you tell Nightwing who I really was? I would have been caught and killed, and I was always your enemy as well. So why let me live?" Rainstone decided to answer the question with a question.

Raven shook her head and sighed, "Because there is a lot more to life than life and death, but I didn't think any other cat understood it."

Rainstone stood stock stiff, thinking of all the death she'd witnessed. "I never wanted to understand it, but I didn't have a choice," Rainstone mewed quietly, forgetting about the problematic situation for a moment.

Raven paused and nodded, then stepped off of Needlepine, who immediately jumped up and raced to Rainstone's side. "I won't tell any cat where you've gone or who you are exactly. But they will figure it out eventually, and when we do fight, I won't be changing sides on Nightwing, he deserves my loyalty after everything," Raven mewed, a grim reminder to how opposite their sides were.

"I won't be holding back either," Rainstone answered heavily.

"Good, I wouldn't want it any other way," Raven purred, chuckling lightly as she turned and faded like black mist into the shadows.

Rainstone closed her eyes softly and then stepped over the border, feeling safety wreathe around her. Their escapade was over, and now any friendships she may have made were only to be used against her. Every cat she'd been living with, laughing with, eating with, fighting with for the past moons were now her worst enemies.m

Chapter 33: Friends Again

Chapter 33: Friends Again

Rainstone raced along the soft grassy path, she could smell it, and she could see it. The RiverClan camp lay just ahead of her. Needlepine had insisted on saying goodbye at the border after Rainstone had informed him on all she knew, though Rainstone wasn't sure why he had seemed so sad to say goodbye.

We live right next to each other; we can meet whenever we want. Well, almost whenever we want. But part of her was relieved that she wouldn't have to deal with her Clan-mates questions about him; she knew that Clan cats frowned upon mingling with cats from other Clans. Except at gatherings, of course.

"Who goes there?!" a voice rang out in the darkness to her ass he was nearing the crossing stream that surrounded one side of camp, a different stream ran along the other side.

Rainstone hesitated; coming back under the cover of night probably hadn't been the smartest thing but... "It's Rainstone," she answered, splashing across the stream.

"Rainstone... who?" the voice faltered and Rainstone felt a flush of anger as she padded up to the guard, Webclaw. She had never really talked to him but still!

"Rainstone the rogue she-cat that your medicine-cat saved from a flood and then went to spy on the enemy for you," she snapped, stepping in front of the gray tom.

"O-oh, it's you," Webclaw mewed. "Was your mission a success?"

"Yes, it went better than I thought it would go," Rainstone answered, still annoyed that he hadn't recognized her.

"W-well I'll escort you to Sunstar's den... actually its better if we

wait until morning," Webclaw murmured to himself.

"Fine with me," Rainstone shrugged.

"Okay, well, the apprentices den is empty right now, so you can go there," Webclaw mewed, trying to sound helpful.

"Thanks..." Rainstone mewed, heading for the rush-made den. *It's empty? Did the apprentices become warriors while I was gone? I was only gone for a moon and a half!* But the den was indeed empty and she slid thankfully into an old nest.

Her broken paw had been making her leg ache and her other paws were ready to fall off. She closed her eyes and fell into a dreamless sleep.

....

"You betrayed us... we will hunt you down and kill you," Nightwing's voice was dangerously soft and only his angry brown eyes, like a snake's, glowed in the darkness.

"No! Leave me alone!" Rainstone struggled but couldn't escape the darkness. Claws pricked at her and she felt panicked fear rush through her.

"We will get you for spying on us, we will chase you to the ends of the earth and then end your life once and for all..." now Nightwing's voice was joined by many and the noise of hisses and screeches surrounded Rainstone as she tried to get away.

"Rainstone! Come on, time to get up. Sunstar wants to see you!" now a clear sharp voice broke through the tormenting darkness and Rainstone sat bolt upright in her nest.

"Rainstone, you okay?" the cat asked, looking slightly worried. It was Webclaw again, but now the pale gray light of dawn outlined him instead of cold moonlight.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," Rainstone muttered, collecting her bearings. She got up and followed Webclaw to Sunstar's den. No cat was out in the clearing, but her fur pricked as she looked for unseen eyes.

Her dream had put her on edge and she hoped she wouldn't be paranoid that cats were perpetually out to kill her.

Though, until we defeat them, there might very well be... Shaking her head, she thanked Webclaw and hesitantly stepped through the mossy curtain into the stone hollow den as the first gleams of orange light broke into camp.

Sunstar sat neatly on his nest, his dark yellow fur shone and his orange eyes were warm and curious. He was as collected and calm as ever. "Rainstone, it's nice to see you back," Sunstar mewed, indicating with his tail for her to sit down.

She obliged, glancing at the splint on her broken paw, it probably was causing more harm then good now that it was all messed up. "How was your mission? Did you learn their plans?" Sunstar asked, leaning forward.

Rainstone nodded, staring at the ground. "Did you ask ShadowClan to send a cat undercover as well? Or was it just coincidence?" she asked, she had to know.

Sunstar glanced at the ground now, "Yes, I did tell them and encouraged them to send a cat. Was he of any help?"

Rainstone gave a slight growl, "He was more of a hindrance then anything. He never once helped me, but I was always helping him. I had told you I could take care of it on my own."

Sunstar shook his head, "I'm sorry, I thought it'd be safer with more than one cat," he didn't sound apologetic though.

Rainstone snorted, deciding not to linger on the topic anymore. "Well, Nightwing has a fairly well-sized group. It doesn't out-number a Clan, but it will if he gets more cats. Also, they are all highly skilled and taught to kill, they are dangerous."

Sunstar blew out a long breath, his eyes darkening.

"Furthermore, they have allies, I don't know who exactly, but Pinefur of ThunderClan is helping them," Rainstone paused, waiting for a reaction, but Sunstar stared unblinking.

"They plan to attack on a full moon, I'm not exactly sure if they plan on attacking a lightly defended camp or at the gathering, but it won't be this full moon, but the next one. This gives us time. They were also talking about taking hostages..." Rainstone trailed off, frowning.

Sunstar was looking worried. "If Pinefur is in on this plan, that will complicate things. He has authority and it's no secret that Stormstar isn't the youngest leader, but I think she has at least two lives left..." Sunstar trailed off and shook his head.

"We have to tell the other Clans and warn them, so that they can be prepared," Sunstar mewed. Rainstone nodded in agreement.

"But right now, you just focus on your training and becoming a warrior again. You've helped us immensely, no need to further trouble yourself. The Clan leaders can take care of the rest," Sunstar mewed, nodding his head.

Rainstone nodded awkwardly, she doubted that she was done dealing with this problem yet. Even if the Clan leaders did take care of it, their Clans were going to get involved, and that included her. "Does every cat know I'm back yet?" she asked, stalling for time.

"Webclaw was spreading the word, I doubt it'll be long before every cat knows if they don't already," Sunstar smirked.

Rainstone purred lightly. "I'm going to see Flickertail, I've got a few injuries to take care of right now. But then I'll go see Sweetberry," she mewed before exiting.

"If you need to take the day off, I'm sure Sweetberry will understand," Sunstar called, but Rainstone had no intention of being lazy today.

"Flickertail!" she called as she padded into the sand-cave den.

"Hmm? What is it?" the red-brown tom sat up in his nest and blinked at her through bleary amber eyes as he yawned. His tail was flicking continuously behind him.

"I'm back," she purred lightly, happy to see her friend again.

Flickertail jumped right up and bounded to her, touching noses in greeting while purring loudly. "It's so good to see you again! I was starting to get worried... wait, you're hurt! What happened?" Flickertail pulled out herbs and started examining her paw and her few scratches that hadn't quite healed from the last battle training session.

"Oh, I was in a few fights. I, err, broke my dead paw," Rainstone explained, holding up the limp paw.

Flickertail shook his head, "That would usually really hurt," he muttered, cleaning off the broken splint and rotten herbs.

"Well, good thing I can't feel it," Rainstone mewed, trying to sound happy about it and failing miserably.

Flickertail gave a grunt as an answer and put a comfrey poultice over the paw before wrapping it in rushes. "I want you to stay off of that for at least the next three days, it was starting to heal in the wrong way, so we need to let it smooth out or you won't be able to use it at all," Flickertail mewed sternly.

Rainstone flicked her tail and looked away, "I know," she mewed with a sigh. Flickertail nodded, than cleaned her scratches, shaking his head over a few infected ones. He also wrapped up all her other paws in dock and horsetail. She hadn't even noticed that she had rubbed the skin off all her paws, leaving small red smudges behind her.

"Okay, go to your den and stay there. Or better yet, just stay here so I can keep an eye on you. It shouldn't be more than a few days, but you have to rest for now," Flickertail mewed sternly, nudging her into a nest that lay close to the entrance, so that she could see out into the clearing without any cat seeing her.

"Now I'm going to go see Sunstar and tell him your injuries, you just stay here. I'm sure you'll have a few guests today," Flickertail chattered on. "So make sure you let them know if you need to rest."

Rainstone nodded and promised she would, but she wasn't sure she wanted to sleep after that dream. She glanced around the den, just

making sure she was alone before she relaxed. She knew she'd be looking closely at all black shadows for a while now.

She closed her eyes and dozed as yellow sunlight shimmered into the den and warmed her dark fur. "Hey, Rainstone!" the call jerked her out of her peaceful doze and she lifted her head to see a silver-gray tabby she-cat with black ear-tips and moss-green eyes standing in front of her.

"Hi, Willowwater... hey, ouch!" she protested, jerking her head away as Willowwater cuffed her ears.

"You left without saying goodbye! What if you hadn't come back?!" Willowwater accused her and Rainstone felt a rush of guilt.

"Sorry, but I had to leave right then. I didn't have time. And obviously, I did some back, so the 'what if,' has no meaning," Rainstone defended herself, still lying down on her side in the nest.

Willowwater scoffed and kicked at the dirt floor with a paw. "But I didn't know if you would be coming back while I was waiting," the she-cat muttered.

Rainstone's ears flicked in surprise, "I thought you never cared about anything? Except the Clan, of course," Rainstone asked, remembering on several occasions when Willowwater claimed that she only cared about the Clan and keeping it strong.

"Yeah, well, life would be more boring without you. You not being here the past moon and so just proved that," Willowwater muttered, sitting down.

"Well, you survived, and I'm sure the Clan is doing fine?" she inquired, hoping Willowwater would tell her all that she missed.

"Yep! Cloudypaw, Pikepaw, and Dawnpaw became Cloudysky, Pikestripe, and Dawnflower," Willowwater announced happily, twitching her ears.

"Also, Creekshade is expecting Cedarheart's kits and Ottersplash's kits are almost ready to be apprentices," Willowwater continued. "At this rate, we will recover all the cats we lost last leaf-bare!"

Rainstone didn't like how she had phrased that, sounding like new cats could replace the old ones. *Once a friend is gone, it's gone. Having new kits won't bring back my dead kits*. Rainstone fell into a grumbling mood as she talked to Willowwater.

She didn't say much about Nightwing's plan, Sunstar had made it clear that it was his job now, but she talked about the camp and the cats in it. "Wow, those cats sound messed up. They don't like to hunt for their Clan-mates, and they'll just kill any cat that doesn't have black fur? Why?" Willowwater looked aghast and almost unbelieving.

"Nightwing thinks black cats are superior, so only black cats are useful. When he takes care of the Clan, he wants all the black cats to be in charge of any cat that doesn't have black fur," Rainstone explained.

"But you kept up just as well with any cat there, right? So that just proves it not to be true!" Willowwater pointed out.

Rainstone rolled her eyes, "Common sense disproves Nightwing's conjecture, but yes, I infiltrating his ranks proved it," she mewed.

Willowwater nodded, but her green eyes were troubled. "But surely they have no hope of succeeding, if there are as few cats there as you say," the gray tabby she-cat tilted her head to one side.

"True, there aren't enough cats in that group, but they talked about allies and I don't know how many cats that they have," Rainstone mewed, frowning and thinking it over. Pinefur had definitely talked as if he had a lot more cats then Nightwing.

"Do you know who the allies are?" Willowwater asked, eyes wide.

Rainstone sighed, "I have an idea, but Sunstar is deciding how to deal with that, so I can't tell you. But I need to figure something out, and I'm going to need help..." she trailed off, catching her breath. She knew exactly who she needed to help her, she just didn't want to ask him. Not now.

"Can I help?" Willowwater asked, jumping to her paws excitedly.

"No, you don't need to get involved," Rainstone mewed unenthusiastically.

"Oh, come on. I haven't been able to do anything while you've been risking your life. And it's not like you can do anything right now with your injuries," Willowwater mewed, flicking her tail at Rainstone's paws.

Rainstone growled, "Fine, but you can't tell any cat or ask me any questions I don't want to answer. Got it?"

Willowwater nodded and Rainstone sighed, wondering how this would end. "I need you to get Needlepine, the ShadowClan cat who was undercover with me. In three days, when Flickertal lets me out of here, I need to meet him at the border at night to go into ThunderClan territory," Rainstone murmured, looking around to make sure no cat was there listening.

Willowwater looked confused and perplexed. "How do I do that?"

"I don't know; go look for him at the border for border patrol or something. You have three days and this is very important," Rainstone insisted.

Willowwater looked nervous, but hardened her eyes and puffed up her chest. "You can count on me. But one thing, I come with you into ThunderClan territory." Rainstone tried to interrupt but Willowwater continued. "There's no way I'd let you go sneaking onto enemy territory with just a ShadowClan cat for company."

Rainstone rolled her eyes, but she knew that she had told Willowwater too much to not let her have her way now. "Okay, you get Needlepine at the border, and you can come," Rainstone mewed.

Willowwater nodded but hesitated. "Look, you don't have to answer if you don't want... but, why do you trust this cat so much? He's an enemy as much as any ThunderClan cat is, why have him help?"

Rainstone sighed and shook her head, "You wouldn't understand. When you're surrounded by enemies, you become friends with any type of ally very quickly. You instinctively search for a friend in

him, and you can usually find him as desperate for a friend as you are," Rainstone mewed, thinking back to the cave and how strongly she had become attached to Whisper, Half, and Flower.

Willowwater nodded slowly, but Rainstone knew she didn't really understand it. "Well, I'd better go start looking for that cat... I'll make sure everything is ready for you," Willowwater purred before exiting the den.

Rainstone purred and laid her head down on the nest. It was so good to be surrounded by friends again.

Chapter 34: No Help

Chapter 34: No Help

Rainstone flexed her broken paw and glanced up at Flickertail. She hadn't felt so good since she'd left RiverClan. No bones ached, no scratches stung, no paws were sore. She picked at a stray dock leaf on one of her paw wraps and glanced at Flickertail again.

It'd been three days since she'd returned and she'd been in his den for the entire time. However, Willowwater had given her some good news yesterday...

"It's all set! Needlepine will meet us on the dock at the border just after sunset. I have to admit, I didn't think he'd go, but I guess I was wrong," Willowwater whispered in her ear with one eye on Flickertail.

"Good," Rainstone breathed back, "Though I might have some trouble with getting Flickertail to let me out of here so late in the day..."

"Leave that to me!" Willowwater had purred, and then she'd left.

Rainstone hadn't seen her since and with the sun starting to go down, she was anxiously awaiting Willowwater and hoping her plan wouldn't mess anything up. *Although, Willowwater is a little edgy and catches on quickly enough...* she'd have been a lot more useful than Needlepine.

But Rainstone couldn't help but miss Needlepine's honest naivety, always trying to do his best and help every cat. *He wasn't the smartest cat, but he knew when it was time to do his part.* She wondered how long it'd be until this whole mess was resolved and they could meet more regularly. Rainstone wasn't ready to let this friendship go yet.

It's weird, I grew up hating toms, except for my brother of course, but now my favorite friend is a tom! So weird... Rainstone shifted to a sitting position in her nest, preparing herself for the night ahead.

Flickertail glanced back at her over his shoulder from where he was making a poultice for the elder, Sheeplight. "Are you still hungry? I can go get another fish if you want," Flickertail offered, neatly wrapping the poultice in a leaf packet with a few poppy seeds. Something Rainstone hadn't had in the mountains and wasn't sure what they did exactly.

"Nah, I'm good, I'm just feeling restless. I'm not used to lying around," Rainstone mewed, feeling a twinge of gloom as she thought about when she'd been confined in the cave in the mountains. At least she'd been able to walk around.

"Well, you can start trying to walk on it tomorrow, okay?" Flickertail mewed, his constantly flicking tail knocked over a carefully placed pile of leaves, sending them in all directions. "Frog-dung!' Flickertail cursed under his breath and set to gathering them up while keeping his tail from not knocking over anything else.

Rainstone watched him quizzically; *does that tail have a mind of its own or something? Or does he just do it for comedy?* Watching as Flickertail growled to himself, she guessed it w as the first one.

"Hey! Rainstone!" Rainstone jerked her head away from watching Flickertail race around the den after flitting leaves like a kit.

"Willowwater, what is it?" Rainstone asked levelly, keeping herself calm and poised, no way she was going to allow the medicine-cat to be the first to become suspicious!

"Why don't you come out into the clearing, catch a bit of the sun and share a meal!" Willowwater invited.

Rainstone groaned inwardly, but decided to test Willowwater. "I already ate, sorry," she mewed as Flickertail paused to glance at Willowwater for a moment.

"Sorry, but Rainstone needs to rest now. Maybe tomorrow," the red-brown tom's fur glowed bronze and his cream dappled spots glowed white in the sun.

"Oh, well, uh," Willowwater looked confused and gave her a

perplexing glance.

Rainstone didn't respond, feeling no sympathy. *Seriously?! She says she'll take care of it and then comes up with something as simple as that!* "Good bye Willowwater!" Rainstone called, waving her tail and giving her a sharp look.

I knew it'd be better without help... I don't need any help anyways! She looked at Flickertail, "I need a drink, and I don't want it from this stream!" she started complaining in a high-pitched voice. It was very simple, really, she just kept up complaining about menial things in a super annoying way, and Flickertail was bound to give in.

"Okay!" he finally snapped, glaring at her. "Go outside and do whatever, but be back before long, okay?" Flickertail sighed, waving his tail in deliberate exasperation.

Rainstone smirked to herself, *works every time!* She stood up and carefully made her way out of the den, making sure she stayed off her broken as long as she was in Flickertail's line of sight, and then went to barely touching it to the ground as she limped over to Willowwater.

She glared at the silver tabby as she approached. "*That* was your idea?! I've heard better excuses from a kit! We really need to work on that if you're going to be of any help..." Rainstone sighed and shook her head.

Willowwater ducked her head in embarrassment, but then lifted her head with fierce defiance in her eyes. "I'll do better next time, so what now?" Willowwater asked with her old danger-loving excitement.

"*Now* we are going to go get a drink of water outside of camp and then take a short walk that takes a lot longer then we meant it to," Rainstone mewed.

"Okay! Sounds good to me," Willowwater smirked at her and her eyes danced with excitement. *At least she's smart enough to catch onto that... I'm not sure if Needlepine would.*

"Good, now let's leave, quickly," Rainstone mewed, glancing around the mostly empty clearing. The sun was just a slim crescent over the horizon and they were going to be late. "You lead," Rainstone ordered in a low voice.

Willowwater nodded and led her across the stream. Rainstone crossed using the stepping stones; she wanted to keep her bandaged paws dry. No cat stopped them; Rainstone supposed they didn't care about her like they would a Clan cat, whatever, it made her job easier.

Rainstone paused to take a quick drink from the stream once they were a little bit away from camp. She hadn't been completely lying that she needed a drink... Then they continued in silence, the warm night air flowing over her ruffled fur and frayed whiskers.

"We're almost there," Willowwater mewed quietly as Rainstone peered around the taller she-cat. Rainstone nodded tensely, thinking hard about how they were going to do this.

It's going to be difficult and dangerous. But it could help clear up a lot of things; let's just hope we don't run into the enemy... I'm not exactly in my strongest state right now.

Rainstone sighed and shook her head; they would just have to hope for a little luck. Amazingly, they made it to the border with still a little light in the sky and without bumping into any cats. *Heh, after I wished for luck, I'd thought I'd never get it!*

Peering around and crouched low to the ground, Willowwater signaled for her to stop moving. Rainstone rolled her eyes and stood up and strolled onto the wooden dock. The wind was blowing their scents away from the Clans and she wasn't going onto ShadowClan territory anyways.

Willowwater still hissed at her as she inspected her paw to make sure the splint was still intact. It was and she hadn't felt any pain in her leg to indicate that she was messing it up. *About this time, using it will start to help it anyways... Or at least it would have if it'd been taken care of at the very start.*

Willowwater sat nervously next to her, sifting her sharp gaze from one border to the next. Rainstone stared down at the slow moving water, a pool full of stars. The inky black depths and the rhythmic ripples lulled her senses and made her feel dreamy.

Yet, she was still the first one to detect Needlepine's presence. "Is it him?" Willowwater asked nervously.

"Yep," Rainstone answered in a low voice. She could tell from the pattern of his bouncy paw-steps. She glimpsed his laughing green eyes that sparked with excitement and passion. She swallowed, her heart was beating fast in her chest and she was completely focused on his approach. No, focused on him.

Come on! She scowled at herself, *what's gotten into me?* "Hey, Needlepine," she called softly and he jerked his head, which was silhouetted against the fading light of the sky, toward her and picked up his pace until he was right in front of her.

"Rainstone, it's good to see you again," he purred and leaned forward as if to touch noses in greeting. Then he drew abruptly back as he saw Willowwater glaring at him. "Oh, sorry, old habit," he muttered under his breath, taking a pace or two backwards.

Rainstone rolled her eyes at Willowwater, but doubted it was seen in the dark. "Let's get going, we need to be back just after moon-high," she mewed, moving down to the shore from the dock and heading into ShadowClan territory.

There was a hesitation and then two sets of paws started following her. "Needlepine, lead," Rainstone ordered, letting him move up besides she while she slipped back a pace.

"Ah, okay, but what are we doing exactly?" Needlepine asked.

"We're going to try to figure out who Nightwing's allies are of course," Rainstone answered, glancing up as an owl swooped overhead.

Needlepine stumbled and Willowwater's steps faltered. "Is that a problem?" Rainstone questioned testily, glancing at Willowwater.

"No, but I would like to ask how you want to find out?" Willowwater questioned, looking angry. "I didn't come out here to go on a wild goose-chase."

Rainstone's whiskers twitched, "You can go back to camp whenever you want. Do you Needlepine, want to go home too?" she questioned in a silky voice.

Needlepine shook his head, "No, I trust you, I know you'll find a way, even if it doesn't make sense," the tom answered, turning his head forward again. Rainstone nodded and they continued in silence, though Willowwater seemed to grow sulkier.

Still, it was half-way to moon-high when they reached ThunderClan territory. "This is going to take longer than I thought," Rainstone sighed, looking around with narrowed eyes.

The forest was as dark as a cave with twisty looking tendrils strewn across the floor just waiting to trip them up. "How do cats live in a mess like this?" she muttered as she headed into the territory.

"Wait! We can't go into their territory," Willowwater hissed.

"It's their own fault. However, you should roll in their scent markers so they won't detect you," Rainstone advised, her fur already drenched in the musty scent. She didn't find it directly unpleasant, but not as favorable as RiverClan or even ShadowClan.

The two Clan-born cats wrinkled their noes as they withered against the scent markers. "And try not to make so much noise," Rainstone sighed as leaves and twigs crackled against the two squirming cats.

"Sorry," Needlepine apologized, standing still with heavy ThunderClan scent.

"Perfect," Rainstone purred, laughing on the inside at how he looked like a ruffled kit with his fur sticking up everywhere. Willowwater wasn't much better but looked angrier about it.

"I'm going to stink worse than a fox for moons," the gray tabby moaned.

Rainstone scowled, she was starting to get annoyed with her Clan-mate. "Well, keep it to yourself until we're back in our territory. We need to get going real quiet-like," Rainstone ordered looking down at her smoky black paws. She really wished they'd turn gray again so that she couldn't be identified as easily by her enemies.

She took the lead now, as neither of the other two cats knew ThunderClan territory. Scent was impossible to track, but Rainstone had grown up in the mountains where scents didn't stay on stone so she was right at home following small visual signs.

"Shh, the camp is right ahead," Rainstone whispered, peering through the shaded forest. She was pressed against a leafy tree; she was sure these cats called it a maple tree, and blended right into the shadows.

Needlepine and Willowwater were back a few paces pressed against a large thorny plant and nodded to acknowledge they had heard. Rainstone crept a few steps forward until she came to a wall of brambles.

Stifling a hiss of pain as one stabbed her cheek, she backed up. *Must be the camp barrier*. Rainstone thought, peering up to see an opening in the sky past the bramble barrier. *Now here comes the tricky part...*

"You guys stay right here, don't do anything. If you get seen, run back to the border fast as you can," Rainstone whispered, creeping back to the two cats.

"Where are you going?" Willowwater asked while Needlepine nodded at her words.

"To do what I came here to do! With any luck, I'll come back just fine," Rainstone whispered.

Willowwater hesitated before muttering what sounded like an agreement. Rainstone nodded, locking eyes with Needlepine for a moment. "Good luck," he whispered and Rainstone purred, she was glad he hadn't said, 'be careful,' or something like that. It showed he had faith in her.

He just knows what I like so easily. She thought, turning back toward the barrier. She followed the barrier until she reached an opening. Wriggling through the tight space she gasped as her front paws hit nothing.

Lurching back she heard the clatter of a few pebbles fall down from wherever she was and the tear of her fur against the brambles. Catching her breath, she leaned forward cautiously. Her eyes widened as she saw the bottom of the camp and that she was at least the height of the surrounding trees below her.

Well, I know why they don't get attacked; no cat would want to try to navigate a fighting force around this in the dark! Rainstone shivered, discovering how much more difficult her job was now. The only way to get in was the entrance where the guard was stationed.

Might as well check it out anyways. She moved carefully down the slope to the entrance, more confident of her paw-steps now that her path was illuminated by the moonlight. She halted as she heard the rustling of leaves in front of her.

Heart leaping to her throat as panic flowed through her; she dove for a fern bush and tried to quiet her heavy breathing. Peering through the leaves, she caught sight of a cat, she recognized by scent the guard, prowling up the ravine.

She held her breath, wondering if she'd been spotted. But the guard was moving in a relaxed and lazy way, almost looking resentful. "What was Pinefur thinking putting me on guard duty after the dusk patrol? I'm exhausted, besides, it was Scampfur's turn," the cat muttered.

Rainstone waited for him to pass up the path. *He's probably checking the boundaries, so the entrance will be unguarded for a few minutes*. She slid down to the entrance and passed into the camp; fully aware she was in enemy territory and stood no chance of escape while in this camp that was guarded by such steep walls.

She rested in the deep shadows of camp for a few minutes until the guard returned to his spot at the entrance. She had been unsure of how well he would be able to see the camp at the top of the hollow,

but hadn't been interested in finding out.

Now she had been given time to figure the camp out. She had deduced that the warriors den was probably the biggest gorse and bramble den; luckily, she could approach it while staying in the shadows the entire way. *I just hope I get his attention without getting anyone else's attention...*

She sighed and starting creeping like a mouse over to the den. She took a deep breath and dared to peer her head into the den. The den was full of dark sleeping bodies and rhythmic breathing. Swallowing, well aware she was creeping into the lion's den, she stepped forward, and searched for the one cat she needed.

She caught her breath as she found him, than growled in annoyance as she saw he was at the very back of the den. Backing out of the den and taking refuge in the shadows, she thought hard for a moment before making her way to the back of the den on the outside.

He's a light sleeper and also suspicious, this should work. She took a deep breath and reached her un-broken paw under the den, hoping she had judged the distance right and was grabbing his tail and not some other cat's tail.

Her claws managed to tweak the tail, and then she drew back and waited in agonizing silence as she heard a surprised grunt and movement from the inside. She prayed to Song that this was the right cat.

She waited in the deep shadows, eyes fixed on the entrance. She stared in surprise as the silhouette of a cat became outlined against the dark night sky. *But is this my cat?* She waited with suspended breath as the cat slowly turned.

There, those amber eyes, no doubting it now. Taking a deep breath, she tried to quiet her trembling, but gave up and just faced him. The eyes flashed with anger, sadness, fear, and recognition all at once as she faced him.

This is it; I told myself I didn't need help. But right now, I really need

his. She drew another deep breath, hoping she wouldn't pass out as she tried to speak. "Hello, Scamp."

Chapter 35: Who Did It?

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"Rainstone?!" the outraged and desperate hiss was the first thing Scampfur said.

"Yes, now be quiet!" Rainstone murmured, forcing herself to stop shivering.

"Why? You're invading my camp! Look, we're enemies as long as we are in different Clans, you need to understand that," Scampfur growled.

"I do understand! But there is a bigger enemy here and I need your help right now," Rainstone growled, feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

Scampfur opened his mouth then closed it, thinking. Rainstone knew he was too curious to make her leave without at least hearing her out. "Fine, I'll listen to what you have to say, but not here," Scampfur murmured, looking around quickly.

He then led her quickly to a side tunnel at the back of the camp. Rainstone wrinkled her nose at the stench but followed him without complaining until they slid through a torn gap in the barrier and were out in the forest.

"Okay, so what's this about?" Scampfur sighed, turning toward her with a wary but curious expression.

"I suppose you've heard about Nightwing of ShadowClan who turned rogue?" Rainstone started and Scampfur nodded.

"He's made a group of cats designated for taking the Clans down-"

"What does that have to do with you being here though?" Scampfur sighed, interrupting her impatiently.

"Be quiet and you might find out," she growled, curling her lip. *How did I ever love him once?* She didn't recognize that cat anymore. "Anyways, I spied on his group for a while and leaned that Nighwing has an ally, it's Pinefur, your deputy," Rainstone hesitated, wondering if Scampfur would believe her.

It seemed their past counted for something for even though Scampfur looked surprised, he didn't question her. "I-I've heard Pinefur is a little shady at times, though I doubt many cats in the Clan would deem him a traitor," Scampfur muttered.

Rainstone shrugged and continued, "I also have reason to believe that he has his own set of cats that are not in the Clans. Now, I need to know if you know if Pinefur has any very close allies in ThunderClan and if there is any place near here that would resemble a cave," Rainstone asked, leaning forward and remembering the scent on the two cat's fur that were accompanying Pinefur.

Scampfur frowned, "He has plenty of supporters... Ivyfur and Icewhisker are pretty close to him, but I don't know if they'd be part of something against the Clan. Especially Icewhisker, he's very loyal and Stormstar's nephew," Scampfur mused.

"What about a cave-like place? Anything where he could hide a bunch of cats nearby?" Rainstone asked insistently. It didn't sound like Pinefur had many ThunderClan cats, if any, in on his plans.

"Well... No, I don't really know... Wait!" Scampfur jumped up with pricked ears. "There are tunnels between ThunderClan and WindClan, I always thought they smelled like the caves back home, but I've never been in them. They're checked on patrols to make sure no WindClan cat's been using them, but they are blocked off and all cats are forbidden to use them."

Rainstone nodded, "Sounds like an ideal hiding place to me," she mewed, glad that this trip was turning productive. "I'll need you to show them to me," she added, looking at Scampfur steadily.

"What, tonight?" Scampfur looked alarmed and ready to refuse.

"No, mouse-brain, not tonight. I need to be getting back to RiverClan, but I'll return in three nights by the ShadowClan border near the lake and you can show me then. My paw is still broken so I can't travel this far too often," Rainstone winced, it didn't hurt, but she could tell from her leg that it was aching.

"Okay, well, I'll show you to the border," Scampfur offered, looking much friendlier now than when he'd first seen her.

"Oh, thanks, but I need to go find the other cats who came here with me," Rainstone mewed.

Scampfur started, "You didn't come by yourself?" he asked.

Rainstone glared at him. "Do I look like the kind of idiot that would go into enemy territory all by myself when I can't even run right?"

Scampfur's eyes took a sarcastic glint and he opened his jaws.

"You know what, forget I asked that," Rainstone snapped, cutting off whatever Scampfur was going to say. "Now lets go," she sighed, feeling exhausted and with the night only half over.

Scampfur followed her as she circled back over to the top of the hollow and approached a fern bush that smelled faintly of her two companions. "Come on, guys, let's get going," Rainstone mewed quietly.

Silence answered her and her belly clenched in apprehension. "Guys?" she asked nervously, cautiously stepping forward, fully aware that Scampfur was watching her in horror. *Oh no, if they cause ThunderClan trouble then I don't think Scampfur will help us!*

With a shaky paw, afraid of what she'd find, or more exactly, what she wouldn't find, she moved the fern leaves aside. "Are you kidding me?!" she snarled, feeling her blood boil in a heartbeat and anger flash behind her eyes.

Willowwater and Needlepine lay curled together under the fern bush with soft snores and sleepy breathing. *How could they fall asleep at a time like this?!* "Get up!" Rainstone snarled, poking them sharply with a claw.

Willowwater jumped at the first touch and stared at her groggily while Rainstone practically had to heave Needlepine to his paws. "Now get up! We're leaving!" Rainstone snarled as quietly as she could.

Willowwater yawed and nodded while Needlepine just followed her dazedly. Scampfur gave her an odd look and she felt herself flush in embarrassment. *Could they seriously not even stay awake for me? Scampfur is going to think I've found the biggest losers to help me!*

Flushing with anger, she fumed as Scampfur led them back to the border. On the way, the two followers woke up enough to realize she was murderously furious and that they had screwed up. "Thanks for the help Scampfur, you won't forget, right?" she asked, still unable to meet his gaze for embarrassment.

"Nope, I'll see you then, anything to help against this menace. I want my kits and mate o be safe, and that won't happen until this is taken care of," Scampfur mewed, his eyes serious and sincere.

Rainstone's heart creaked with pain as he said those words that showed he cared so much for another cat. But she pushed it away, so what if she didn't have any cat to care about like that? That didn't mean she wouldn't. She glanced at Needlepine, feeling herself flush with heat again, but this time it wasn't from anger.

"C'mon, we need to get home," Rainstone announced and marched off with a wave of her tail at Scampfur.

The two cats were silent as they followed her, and Rainstone relished in the calm quiet. Finally, Willowwater broke the silence, "Sorry about falling asleep," she muttered.

"So you should be," Rainstone snapped back angrily, "Falling asleep on a mission like that and in enemy territory no less! You two have worse sense then kits!" Rainstone snorted.

"Sorry," they chorused in unison.

"Well, you'll pay for it. Since I won't require either of your assistance any further," Rainstone went on snappishly.

Willowwater sighed, as if she'd been expecting that, but Needlepine gave a sound of distress. "No! you can't do it alone, it's too dangerous!" he protested, hurrying up to her side.

Rainstone glared at him, "It would be more dangerous to take along a cat that can't help himself. Besides, I'm not alone; I've got Scampfur to help me," Rainstone continued.

"About that, how do you even know him anyways? You were a rogue! How did you know that he'd help you?" Needlepine asked suspiciously.

"If you must know, and you don't, we actually came from the same group of rogues. Funny how we ended up finding each other here after leaving," Rainstone laughed with a twinge of sadness.

"Did you love each other?" Needlepine blurted out, green eyes deadly serious.

Rainstone was surprised by the question and hesitated, fully aware that Willowwater was listening intently. She was definitely not going to tell them the truth. "Maybe, I'm not sure. We were close, if that's what you wanted to know. But Scampfur has obviously moved on," Rainstone added in a tone that didn't invite any more questions.

Needlepine fell silent and trialed behind her and Willowwater kept quiet as well until they finally reached the RiverClan border. "Well, I'll be saying goodnight Needlepine, maybe I'll see you at the gathering," Rainstone mewed casually, though she would probably contact him before then.

"Yes, goodnight, Rainstone, Willowwater," Needlepine mewed in tight courtesy, then turned and disappeared into the forest.

"Well, that was an interesting walk. It's past moon-high, what do we tell the Clan?" Willowwater asked as Rainstone just breathed in the wind coming off the lake.

"Simple, we were on a walk that took much longer then we meant it too," she smirked.

...

"Rainstone! Where were you last night? I couldn't find you anywhere!" Flickertail exclaimed, standing over the makeshift nest in the apprentices den.

"I just went out of camp to get a drink and Willowwater joined me, so we ended up talking and getting back much later then we meant," Rainstone muttered, like any rudely awaken cat would.

"How come you didn't come back to the medicine-cat's den then?" Flickertail demanded, looking completely exasperated.

"Because," Rainstone groaned, pushing herself to a sitting position. "It was late and I didn't want you to wake up and lecture me," she muttered, licking her paw and smoothing her frayed whiskers.

Flickertail growled then sighed in resignation. "Well, how did your paw hold up on that short walk of yours?" Flickertail asked with a gleam in his eyes and Rainstone huffed.

So he knows there was more to it than just a walk, I bet it's because Willowwater was so suspicious last night when she tried to get me out of the medicine-cat den.

"Its fine, my leg started to ache when we were close to ending, but it didn't hurt," Rainstone mewed.

Flickertail frowned and looked at the paw. Rainstone had fixed the splint last night so it didn't look like she'd trekked half way across the lake twice last night. "Well, it looks okay. But for goodness sakes, be careful!" Flickertail sighed.

"Sure thing," Rainstone purred. She had no intention of being careful, and from the annoyed look Flickertail gave her, he knew it.

"So, what time is it?" Rainstone asked, it seemed to be fairly early, but she could hear plenty of cats already up and about.

"Mintbreeze just finished sending out morning patrols. And I told Sweetberry you can do some hunting today if you're careful," Flickertail mewed reluctantly.

"Good, it's annoying to be an, 'apprentice,' when I'm so much older than an apprentice should be," Rainstone grumbled. *But I do like having a den to myself*, she reminded herself.

"Well, you should go looking for her then, you know she doesn't like to be kept waiting," Flickertail mewed, flicking her ears with his tail. Rainstone remembered that Sweetberry was Flickertail's sister.

"Later, I need something to eat first," Rainstone yawned, feeling her belly rumble.

Flickertail huffed but didn't object as she got up and limped out. Rainstone looked around and snuck around to the fresh-kill pile as discreetly as possible. She grabbed a tiny fish and then looked around before gulping it down.

"Hey! We need to get training, finish your meal later!" Sweetberry called impatiently.

Rainstone scowled, one tiny fish would hardly tide her over until later! But she didn't object and meandered over to Sweetberry who was waiting by the entrance. "Come on, I want you ready for your assessment as soon as that paw is healed," the honey-gold she-cat mewed as she led her out of camp.

"Just asking, what left do I have to learn?" Rainstone asked with a sigh.

"Your swimming skills could use some work, especially in the fighting region," Sweetberry snapped.

Rainstone ignored her; she knew that she was a fine swimmer and an even finer fighter. Sweetberry glanced back at her, as if waiting for something. "What?" Rainstone asked, trying to smooth the grumpiness from her voice.

"I was just expecting you to make some smart remark about how your skills already outclass mine," Sweetberry mewed with a note of surprise in her voice.

Rainstone stared at her in confusion, "Why would I do that? I mean, I *thought* it, but I wouldn't *say* it."

Sweetberry rolled her eyes, though there was a laugh in her voice, "Well, I guess a cat can't change *that* much in one moon."

Rainstone shook her head and decided to ignore Sweetberry's odd remarks. *I haven't changed at all! She's just remembering me all wrong*. But now they were near the area where they usually would fish and so she put the thoughts away.

Crouching down, Rainstone shifted onto her belly, so that she could use her uninjured paw for catching the fish, while not putting any pressure on her broken paw. Sweetberry settled down a few tail-lengths downstream and stared into the water.

Rainstone stared into the river as well, but was absent-minded apart from searching for a flicker of scales. The sun soaked into her fur and soothed her tired muscles and the rock was warming in the rising sunlight. She dashed her paw into the water instinctively and hooked out a large pike which she finished off quickly.

A moment later, Sweetberry was hooking out a trout and Rainstone focused more intently on fishing, determined to catch more than Sweetberry to show she was more than ready to be a warrior.

She flashed out a paw as she saw the gleaming silver scales of a fish, but it dove down and she let out a hiss of annoyance. A moment later, Sweetberry hooked out the same fish and gave her a superior smirk. "You have to do better than that," her mentor laughed.

Rainstone settled down once more, completely concentrated on hooking out fish as they swam past. By sun-high she had just as impressive a pile as Sweetberry and her mentor was nodding in satisfaction.

"We can head back to camp now, any more fish and we won't be able to carry it all back," Sweetberry mewed distractedly.

Rainstone felt the same and rolled on her back, scratching herself against the warm rock. But as she exposed her belly, she flipped back to her paws instinctively and looked around suspiciously. The hair on her neck bristled and she sniffed the air, trying to block out

the babble of the stream.

"Something wrong?" Sweetberry asked.

"Somethings... Not right," she murmured, flexing her claws.

"Hmm?" Sweetberry stood erect, ears pointed straight.

"Smell that?" Rainstone murmured, backing against Sweetberry so that their backs were to each other.

"Yeah... rogues?" Sweetberry whispered.

"Not just any rogues," Rainstone growled, looking down at her faded black paws. They looked like a very dark gray now, but could just as easily be mistaken for black. In short, she still looked like, 'Pepper.'

"Three cats, we can take them," Rainstone murmured.

"But you're hurt! The first chance we get, we head for camp," Sweetberry hissed.

"No way, I have a suspicion there's some kind of trap. I mean, why would they attack just two cats?" Rainstone growled, although she had the nagging suspicion they had targeted her.

"Not quite, Pepper," a loud voice rang out. "It seems you thoroughly deceived us, and the information you hold could be sensitive," Rainstone recognized the speaker as Shadow, but because the voice echoed, she couldn't pin-point it.

"Well, maybe you shouldn't so foolishly assume you're better than anyone else?" Rainstone answered sharply.

"Mewl away while you can, because you won't be doing it much longer," Shadow hissed now and Rainstone knew exactly where she was.

She gave a harsh laugh in answer, though she felt a tremble along her tail. She felt the warm and surprised gaze of Sweeetberry, it was admiring and pitying at the same time. "Look, one of the cats is

behind that rock, and the other is in that willow tree," Rainstone whispered to Sweetberry, sweeping her tail over the marks that both lay in shadow.

"And the third one?" Sweetberry asked.

"She's mine, the other two aren't much fighters, so you should be able to take'em," Rainstone mewed, readying her paws. Soot and Crow were young and new, Sweetberry would be fine especially with the advantage of the river.

Rainstone let out a yowl and leaped over the river and ducked behind a small shrub bush, barreling herself into Shadow. The older she-cat gave a hiss and Rainstone felt teeth dig into her torn ear. She retaliated, by burying her fangs into Shadow's shoulder, forcing the she-cat on her back.

Pinning her down, Rainstone glared into Shadow's angry eyes. "Don't mess with me, I was never even trying to fight back then," she growled and succeeded in getting a flicker of fear to appear in Shadow's eyes.

Holding her down with her front paws, she used her back paws to churn through Shadow's belly fur, while holding her legs so that Shadow couldn't kick her off of her. A shriek of pain from behind her broke Rainstone's concentration and she glanced over her shoulder to see Crow and Soot beating back Sweetberry.

Shadow took her distraction and kicked her off, sending her sliding across the stone that edged the river, her back paw slipping into the fast moving current as she stood up. She gave Shadow a daring look and the lithe she-cat raced for her, obviously meaning to ram her into the river.

But just before Shadow contacted with her, Rainstone allowed herself to slip into the river and she bobbed up instantly, watching Shadow fall into the water with a screech. *One down, two to go.*

Pulling herself, dripping, out of the river, Rainstone bounded back upstream and leaped across the river, her wet paws slipping and causing her to slide into Soot. "Sorry kid, but there's no messing

with me or the Clan that saved my life," Rainstone growled, clawing at Soot's muzzle.

Soot snarled, but Rainstone saw a look of hopelessness alight in her dark hazel eyes. Feigning an attack at her ears, Rainstone bowled into Soot's chest and flung the she-cat backward into a rock where she lay, stunned.

Sweetberry, fur with red spots of blood on her golden fur, was chasing Crow off. The tom stopped to grab Soot and then was gone, racing toward the border. Rainstone sighed in relief and sat down, her paws trembling.

"Are you okay?" Sweetberry asked, sounding out of breath.

"Yeah, only a few scratches," Rainstone mewed, drawing a paw over her bloody ear. "What about you?" Rainstone asked, looking at Sweetberry's scratches, mostly on her shoulders.

"I'll heal," Sweetberry winced as she licked at the blood.

"We should get back to camp and report this," Rainstone yawned, feeling incredibly tired.

"Yeah, grab the prey too, we'll need to eat tonight and I'll bet there will be less hunting patrols after this," Sweetberry nodded, looking just as tired as she felt. Between the laziness of the warm rock and the intense scuffle, everything had been drained.

Rainstone grabbed her prey and Sweetberry grabbed hers and they started heading warily back to camp. Rainstone was constantly flicking her ears around listening for any suspicious noise since her nose was full of the scent of fish and the slippery creatures blocked most of her view.

But everything was quiet, and the only thing that was accomplished by flicking her ears around was that she sent drops of blood flying around. "Oh no," Sweetberry dropped her prey suddenly and stopped dead, eyes wide in horror.

"What?" Rainstone asked tensely, dropping her won prey and looking around.

"No!" Sweetberry cried, rushing forward and collapsing on the ground, pawing at something desperately while begging StarClan for it to not be true.

Then Rainstone saw it and her heart missed a beat. "Oh no..." she whispered in horror. She blinked back the tears in her eyes as Sweetberry started wailing. On the ground in front of her, covered in blood and terrible wounds, was a small brown and white patched tom.

It was Patchkit. And Rainstone was sure she knew who had killed him.

Chapter 36: Moon Cave

Chapter 36: Moon Cave

Rainstone turned away as Ottersplash gave another heart wrenching cry as she held her dead kit close to her. The scream echoed in her ears, bringing back the same echoes of sadness when she'd lost her kits. The cry was the same; the same pain rang through it. Rainstone recognized it and it brought tears to her eyes.

"Hold still, this might sting a little," Flickertail murmured, rubbing some herb juice into her bitten ear. He was right, it stung, but it was a relief to have physical pain to distract her from old grief.

They'd just gotten back to camp, laden with the dead tom kit. Sweetberry had explained that they'd been attacked to Sunstar, and every cat had come to the conclusion that those cats had killed Patchkit.

Rainstone wasn't convinced about that though. They hadn't had the scent of blood on them, they'd been fresh, and they hadn't just wandered upon Patchkit while looking for her. *They targeted the kit; they wanted to leave a grisly trophy to scare the Clan. And it seems they succeeded.*

Cats were shaking with fear and pressing close to friends, eyes wide and frightened as they searched for the faceless murderer. *I need to figure this out! I know this won't end until they are annihilated.*

The sky had clouded over and a chill breeze swept over the grieving cats. Sunstar was sitting with Mintbreeze, in tense conversation. Most other cats were huddled in spotty groups around the sandy camp. Rainstone trembled with exhaustion, but didn't move, she sat near the apprentices den deep in thought.

I know when they plan to strike, or when they had planned to strike. Now that they know I'm with the Clans, they'll probably change it. Almost makes my undercover work look worthless. But my lead with

Scampfur could be very helpful. If they can break up Pinefur's force, it means the end to conquering the Clans. Nigthwing's cats aren't nearly enough on their own.

Shivering with apprehension, she glanced over her shoulder and spotted a flash of amber eyes. *Song, I'm going to need your help with this*. She looked down at her broken paw and felt a surge of frustration, *I need all my strength! I need this fixed!* She willed it and wanted it, but nothing changed. Force of will has little effect on physical reality.

Well, I'll just have to work around it for now. *And sitting around thinking is only going to do so much*...She got up abruptly, shedding her exhaustion like a blanket and striding out of the depressed grief of the Clan. Jumping nimbly across the stepping stones she headed into the territory.

The soft grass tickled her paws and the bouncy carpet was spotted by moss covered boulders and trees. She closed her eyes and halted when she came to a rounded clearing. *I can't believe how lazy I've become, overconfident, cocky to the point I can solve such a problem on my own. No more, not while lives are in danger.*

Filled with new determination, she crouched on the ground, focused and leaped, arching for her tail and landing neatly on her paws after completing a flip. *Good, I haven't lost my touch, but it's going to take a lot more training if I want to defeat Nightwing. He's much stronger than me as I am now.*

She turned and twisted, running herself through exercises that she once did with Pepper back in the mountains. But she wasn't in the mountains, and she wasn't training just to train, she was training to fight and protect herself and her Clan.

She huffed as she came to an end, it wasn't nearly as fun as training with some cat and it was tough to judge how well she was doing without comparing herself to another cat. *Maybe I can get Willowwater to train with me sometime...*

She thought back to her words last night, "*I won't require either of your assistance anymore*." Why had she said that? *Because I didn't*

think I would, but now I'm going to need more eyes and ears then just mine.

Looking up at the overcast sky, she felt a raindrop on her head and it was soon accompanied by more and more. With the sulky drizzle, her thoughts inevitably turned pessimistic as she headed back to camp. *What can I really do, I can't solve this problem, I can't watch over the entire Clan at once, and Sunstar already told me specifically not to get involved!*

She kicked at a pebble and then pictured Patchkit's torn and bloody brown and white kit fur. She swallowed hard and sighed, feeling her heart tremble. *But if I don't do something, how will I know if I could have prevented a death? And I owe RiverClan this; they did save my life and set me back on my paws after I lost my kits.*

She continued toward camp, the drizzle turned to a steady rain and soaked into her fur. She shivered as she looked down at her broken paw that was caked with mud with the splint falling off. *Dang it, Flickertail will be so angry if he sees this...*

Looking around, she took shelter under a willow tree with just the heavy mist of windblown rain lashing out at her. Stripping the splint off, she grimaced as she licked the mud off the unfeeling paw. Then she grabbed some twigs and leaves, luckily for her there were comfrey plants nearby, and made a new splint.

"I didn't know you could do that," a voice sounded above her and she glanced up to see Willowwater lounging in the branches of the willow tree.

"Yeah, well, I used to be a rogue, no one to take care of myself but me," Rainstone offered the explanation with a twitching tail, peering up at her tabby colored friend.

"Ya' know, I wouldn't have thought it, but you look really good with dark fur," Willowwater yawned lazily, though there was a glint of sadness and a spark of edginess. She had changed so much just with a little bad news. *How different will she be when this is all over? It's just beginning... But I don't want her to change, not ever.*

Sadness at what was at stake and would inevitably be lost choked Rainstone for a moment, than she found her tongue. "I'm ready to be back to how I was, I prefer my fur to anything else," Rainstone mewed, laying down on her belly and staring at the rain haze.

Willowwater was silent for a moment as well, the rain shedding off her fur like a leaf. "Its strange isn't it. How things change so quickly. A life gone so fast no cat saw it happen and with it a future that will never be known," Willowwater mewed quietly, just over the drive of the rain.

Rainstone bowed her head. "I've seen lives go by faster but... it never gets any easier," she sighed, tilting her head back up at Willowwater. Their eyes met and they shared a moment of grief, even though neither had been close to the kit or in particular his mother.

"How many lives have you seen lost?" Willowwater asked, her voice soft and distant, as if seeing her own unpleasant memories.

Thoughts of Crag, Squirrel, and Dusty flitted through her mind along with her two newborn kits and she decided not to answer. It didn't seem right to answer anyways.

"I'm sorry about last night," Rainstone began with a hint of embarrassment.

"Don't, I messed up and you reacted, if not a little harshly since nothing actually went wrong," Willowwater mewed, flicking her tail and sending drops hitting Rainstone's ears.

"I'd actually like to have you continue to help me, although I do think I'll save the wandering across borders to me alone," Rainstone added.

"Fair enough, what can I do? These cats really need to be put in their place," Willowwater growled angrily, claws gouging into the soft wood.

"I don't know right now, nothing maybe. I don't have any straight plans right now," Rainstone admitted.

"Well then, let's make some!" Willowwater mewed, hopping down from the willow bough and landing lightly besides her. According to every other cat, Willowwater was the only RiverClan cat who climbed trees.

"No, not yet, I'm going back to ThunderClan territory in three nights. After that we should be able to make plans, but not until then," Rainstone mewed stubbornly, ignoring the eye roll Willowwater gave her.

"Fine, fine, I'll wait. So there's nothing to do right now?" Willowwater asked impatiently.

"Actually... now that you mention it, if you wouldn't mind training with me, I'd appreciate it," Rainstone mewed.

"How is that going to help?" Willowwater asked, looking annoyed.

"Well, Nightwing's cats train every day, it's required, we need to do the same if we want to beat them," Rainstone explained.

Willowwater looked skeptical, "And two cats training is going to make that much difference in a battle?"

"You never know, it might surprise you how simply one cat can carry a battle on their shoulders," Rainstone mewed quietly, inevitably thoughts of Dusty appeared and she pushed them down.

"Well... okay then, let's get started."

...

"Too slow! Swipe lower than that," Rainstone jerked away and dodged Willowwater's follow-up swipes. The gray tabby was an excellent fighter and Rainstone was sure she'd made the right decision two days ago to train with her friend.

"Got you!" Willowwater crowed in triumph as she flashed her paws at her right shoulder before bowling into her left, thrusting Rainstone on the ground.

"Good job, but not good enough!" Rainstone teased as she rolled

over and ended with Willowwater under her.

"Oh come on! I had you!" Willowwater cried.

"Not anymore!" Rainstone laughed, hopping off her friend.

"I'll get you next time," Willowwater growled, sitting up and licking the scraps of grass and moss off her fur.

"Probably," Rainstone nodded. Willowwater was just as likely to beat her as to lose to her. Rainstone knew she had only won that last match because Willowwater had lost her balance for a moment as she bowled her over.

"It's almost sunset," Willowwater observed as Rainstone once again fixed her splint.

Rainstone looked up at the orange drenched sky that was shaded with red and gold. It was magnificent, the dusty color of roses stained by the sun. And tonight she'd be going to meet Scampfur and investigate the tunnels.

She knew she should be excited and expectant, or even nervous or scared. But she just felt... weary, as if it would be best to leave things alone for now. *No, I have to do this, I have to find out if Pinefur's cats are in those tunnels or not. If they are, then great, if not, then we need to keep looking.*

"You still going?" Willowwater asked, green eyes narrowed and black-tipped ears turned back warily.

"Yeah, I'm still going. I have to know," Rainstone mewed uneasily. She was well aware that Sunstar hadn't done anything since she'd returned; surely there was no time to waste? But he sure was acting like there was time to kill.

"Do you want me to go with you to the ShadowClan border? I can wait there for your return as well," Willowwater offered.

Rainstone opened her jaws to refuse, but decided she'd like a little company to quell her feelings. "Alright, but just to the ShadowClan border," she confirmed.

"Of course, now let's go get some food before we head out," Willowwater mewed, getting up and leading her back toward camp.

The place they'd been using for their sparring matches was the clearing near the willow tree where they'd sat that rainy day. It was close enough to camp that they could easily slip in between patrols and other training, but far enough away that they weren't likely to be disturbed.

Once in camp, Willowwater headed for the fresh-kill pile while Rainstone settled down on the outskirts of the camp, near the stream that curved around the island camp. "Hey, Rainstone," a cat greeted her.

Rainstone tilted her head up to look at a black she-cat with dark green eyes. "Hey... Creekshade," Rainstone mewed in confusion. The expectant queens had tightly avoided her forever, why greet her now?

"Rainstone, can I ask you an honest question?" Creekshade asked, looking nervous.

"Sure," Rainstone answered, sitting up a little.

"Those cats that killed Patchkit... they think black furred cats are special, right?" Creekshade began anxiously and Rainstone saw where it was going, as Creekshade was the only black furred cat in RiverClan besides Flashkit.

"Yes, though unless you're in their group they won't treat you much better, they just give you the option of joining the group before they kill you," Rainstone explained.

Creekshade thought for a moment then continued, "I'm worried that they might come for my kits, like they came for Flashkit. I have black fur and so did both my parents so it's likely that one of my kits will have black fur," Crreksahde mewed anxiously.

Rainstone could see the threat; a kit could be abducted as easily as it could be killed as in Patchkit's case. "Hopefully by the time your kits can walk the threat will be gone. But if not... I can't promise

anything," Rainstone sighed. "Sorry, but I can't make promises I can't keep."

Creekshade nodded, eyes knowing, "I understand, and I guess I'll just have to have faith that the Clan will take care of them..."

"We'll do all we can," Rainstone promised that and Creekshade thanked her before turning away.

"Wow, I've never seen any cat have a conversation with Creekshade without being insulted at least once," Willowwater mumbled, setting down two fish.

"Being a mother can change a lot of cats," Rainstone pointed out, digging into the fish.

"I guess..." Willowwater looked dubious and Rainstone knew she wouldn't understand until she was a mother herself.

They ate in silence as the shadows fell deeper and the suns last gleaming died away into a dark night sky, illuminated only in the western most corner of the sky. By then they had left camp and were nearly at the border as they walked along the shore of the lake.

Water washed over Rainstone's paws in little waves as the dark depths reflected the stars and the almost full moon. "We're here," Willowwater broke the crystalline silence and Rainstone nodded.

"I'll be back before sunrise, probably," she mewed unhelpfully.

"I'll wait until then," Willowwater promised, green eyes deep and sincere.

Touched, Rainstone brushed noses in farewell and headed on alone. Walking along the shore, the sand stuck between her toes and muffled the sound of paw-steps. The wind roared through the trees and the wild hoot of an owl rushed around her.

A storm was coming, she knew it, could feel it, sense it. But nothing touched her serene composure that warily waited what the night had in store for her. *Don't be nervous, nothing is going to happen*. She

told herself over and over, but it didn't help when she wasn't nervous. Just... resigned to whatever would happen.

She made good time and reached the ThunderClan border half-way to moon-high and Scampfur sat by the border, shoulders hunched against the blowing wind that had steadily picked up and he glanced at her as she came up along the border.

She swallowed hard and looked away. *You've moved on; don't wish for things that can't be true*. But still, his windblown fur and the adventure glow in his bright amber eyes stirred a long ago image of him back in the mountains, the moon on his shoulders and the snow framing his face.

"You ready? There's an entrance not far from here," Scampfur mewed, not bothering with a greeting.

Rainstone nodded, bracing herself against the task. She followed Scampfur along a narrow trail through the forest, stopping at what smelled like an old fox den. "This is an entrance," Scampfur nodded, it was covered with brambeles and gorse.

"Okay, let's go but..." Rainstone hesitated, looking at the gaping black hole. She felt a premonition and glanced quickly at Scampfur. "If something happens, just get out as quickly as you can," she mewed in a low voice.

Scampfur looked uneasy, but didn't object, just stepped forward to take the lead as she entered into the hole, disappearing into the blackness. Rainstone swallowed with a deep breath and a crushing of her fears.

The stone was cold and the air colder. The smell was that of stone and water, the smell of the earth was completely gone and Rainstone knew this is where those two cats had been. The complete blackness may have frightened other cats, and Scampfur seemed uncomfortable, but Rainstone had grown up in the mountains, stuck in the cave much more then Scampfur had been.

The floor sloped downward and the air grew stale, but Rainstone could sense the passage breaking in two up ahead from the way the

air flowed. "Wait," she whispered into the darkness and she heard the soft tread of Scampfur's paws stop.

"Do you smell that?" she whispered, sniffing deeply.

"Yeah..." Scampfur murmured. In the passage that broke off from the one they were following, a faint cat scent and a stronger water scent came with a slightly different air flow.

"Let me take the lead, I'm more comfortable," she mewed, slipping past Scampfur in the narrow passage. He flinched as she touched his fur, but she could tell he didn't really mind.

She padded forward into the darkness, not a gleam of light and nothing to show they were anywhere other than the edgy stone floor they walked upon. As she padded forward, she could feel the path slope upward a bit and also twist and turn, several little tunnels branched away, but she kept to the main one which carried the scents.

Eventually she could start to make out a few things such as the walls of the tunnel and her paws flashing on the ground. "Wait here, if you here noise, run," Rainstone whispered.

"Wait, Rainstone," Scampfur mewed anxiously as she stepped forward.

"Look, you have kits and a mate and a Clan you love. I don't, none of those. A few friends to my name at best, now stop being difficult and do as I tell you," Rainstone seethed, she was in no mood for messing around, her wary feelings were making her feel sick and she absolutely dreaded going forward another step. But she had too, she just knew she had to.

Song give me strength, she thought, creeping forward as Scampfur stepped back. She slowly and softly rounded a bend and stopped as she almost tripped over a sleeping ball of fur. It was a cave, an open cave with a hole in the roof that let a circle of night sky shone through.

A black river ran along and the ground was almost completely

covered with cats. Cats of every shape, size, and color. *So Pinefur obviously isn't as picky as Nightwing, figures that he has more cats then. Bet five fish he's just using Nighwing and the sucker doesn't even realize it.*

Pinefur definitely had more cats then Nightwing, Rainstone would estimate about two Clans worth of cats. They were all sleeping; the sound of snoring and rhythmic breathing filled the air. Only one cat was awake, sitting on a cleft in the wall with glassy eyes watching over the many cats.

The silver light came from the moon as it centered in the night sky, turning the stone sparkling and the river silver. *A moon cave... I wish there had been something like this back home in the mountains.*

"Hey you!" a shout rang from behind her and she whirled around and raced back toward where Scampfur was as the cats in the cave began to stir.

She tumbled around a twist and fell into a smelly cat with coarse fur. "Rainstone!" Scampfur's relived tone told Rainstone that he had been caught; the scent of blood also told her he was trying to fight in pitch black. She found him by scent and nudged him along the tunnel, away from the two cats that had found him.

"Hey! You're not getting away so easily!" the cats shouted. Claws gripped Rainstone's leg as she rushed Scampfur into a run.

"Rainstone!" Scampfur called back desperately.

"Remember what I said? Run mouse-brain!" she called back, twisting and kicking, though it was impossible to get a real blow in the dark.

"Got you, spy," the cats growled and claws gripped her shoulders and curled down into her bones.

"Good gracious you stink," she coughed as she was held nose-to-nose with a tom who to say his breath was rancid would be an understatement.

"Lookey here, we got a spy, you're going to be a rich prize for

Pinefur, who knows, he may even promote us for this," the cat chuckled.

Rainstone gulped, this was a bad position she was in. A captive in a dark cave surrounded by enemies who had claimed they wanted her dead. She struggled desperately to get free; if she could get away quickly she could lose them in the tunnels...

But they held her strongly and started smacking her around until she didn't have any sense of her position in the complete darkness. "You're not going anywhere," the cat huffed and gave a ringing blow to her head.

Well, I guess I knew why I was so wary, she thought as they finished with her. She felt so weak they had to drag her away and she was badly scratched and bruised from where they had beaten her, though they'd have a few new scars as well. *I knew this would happen, and now I'm stuck with him in Moon Cave, for now at least.*

Chapter 37: Sticky Situatiuon

Chapter 37: Sticky Situation

... Willowwater's POV ...

She should have been back by now, Willowwater thought anxiously, watching the sun rise over the hill on the east side of the lake, between the RiverClan and WindClan border. *What's taking her so long?*

Her muscles were stiff and her eyes were heavy from waiting up all night. She'd thought Rainstone would be back not long after moon-high, but now it was dawn. She waited awhile longer and the sun rose higher, she needed to get back to camp but by now she was freaking out.

What happened? Did Scampfur attack her? Was it a trap? Did they get caught by cats in the tunnels? Is Rainstone okay? Oh! Why didn't I insist on going with her? If she's dead it'll be my fault! She thought miserably.

She stood and paced along the border, looking along the ShadowClan shore. She didn't see any cat in the gray mist of morning. *What do I do? Do I go back to camp? Do I go looking for her? Do I tell Sunstar?* Somehow she thought that'd just make things worse.

She wasn't sure, but she didn't trust her leader like Rainstone did, he was either not inclined to solve this problem or had a motive behind him. He was much too willing to let Rainstone do what she liked for Willowwater's taste.

The steady rush of the lake filled her ears and her paws were cold on the dewy grass. She looked down at her stone-gray tabby fur, like a bit of mist hovering over the ground. *But what do I do?!*

Anxiety and worry were biting at her to run and see what had

happened, but logic told her it was better to wait, at least until night when she could cross over to ThunderClan's territory more safely. *But what if Rainstone's in trouble?! Oh! Idiot, she would be back by now if she wasn't in trouble! Or maybe she ran away...*

Willowwater shivered and banished the thought; *Rainstone wouldn't do that, would she? Great! Now I'm doubting my friend! Rainstone's going to be in serious trouble for making me worry if she's not dead!*

Huffing, she decided to go back to camp and look for Rainstone that night if she wasn't back before then. She entered camp and was immediately put on the dawn patrol along with Silverstripe and Sweetberry.

"Hey! Where's Rainstone?" Sweetberry demanded, stomping over from the apprentices den.

"I dunno," Willowwater shrugged, she couldn't even imagine the trouble she'd get in for knowing what Rainstone had done and staying silent about it. But it was best for now to allow cats to make their own assumptions.

"If she slept outside camp I'll be very angry!" Sweetberry seethed, stomping out of camp behind Silverstripe. Willowwater noticed a glimmer of worry in Sweetberry's eyes though. *After those two were attacked and Patchkit was killed... that's understandable.*

"I'm sure Rainstone can take care of herself," Silverstripe mewed calmly, the lanky gray tom with silver stripes turned his steady blue gaze on Sweetberry, urging the she-cat to relax. Sweetberry did and padded more quietly and sedately.

"Willowwater? Do you know where Rainstone is?" Sweetberry asked as the padded along the rogue border.

"Nope," Willowwater mewed lazily, shifting her slightly narrowed gaze to the side to glance at Sweetberry.

"Really?" Sweetberry looked disbelieving.

"Yep," Willowwater answered truthfully. *I really have no idea where she is, she should have been back by now, but now I don't know, though*

she's probably somewhere in ThunderClan's territory.

They marked the borders in silence, watching the rogue border closely with wary eyes. On the other side was where those rogues waited, those murders. Anger flashed in Willowwater's belly, *targeting kits and small numbers of cats! Those cowards! They won't be able to beat us, not in a million moons!*

"It's unnerving, isn't it, knowing they're there, but not seeing them," Sweetberry murmured.

"I know, those are some messed up cats we're against," Willowwater sighed.

"You said it," Silverstripe rumbled and Willowwater glanced at the tabby. The senior warrior was actually her father, but he hadn't acted like it since her mother died of green-cough last leaf-bare just after she became an apprentice.

She looked away, she didn't care, she was more of a lone goer anyways, *yet I still follow Rainstone's plans, I wonder what it is about her...* Her friend was certainly strange, and she'd been told more than once that no cat in the Clan really understood why they were friends when they didn't even get along half the time.

But she's so strong; she can fall to the ground and keep going. She's a little overconfident and tends to do things the back handed and secretive way, but luck usually is on her side and it works out. I hope it didn't run out last night.

Willowwater was growing more aggravated as they remarked the WindClan border and headed back to camp. "Wait, let's do the ShadowClan border," Silverstripe mewed and Sweetberry nodded in agreement.

Willowwater huffed, "We should have done that first then and gone around, now we have to go to the other side of the territory!" she complained.

"Don't whine, until we recover our numbers from green-cough and new-leaf floods we all have to put in a little more effort,"

Sweetberry mewed sternly, green eyes flashing with a moment's sadness.

Willowwater scowled, but didn't voice her complaint; every cat had lost someone in the previous seasons. And the scar still laid heavy on all the hearts*, that's what scares me, we may not have the strength to fight this if it's as bad as Rainstone fears.*

She was silent as they crossed their calm and peaceful territory, hopping over the many streams that curved through the territory and enjoying the warmth of the middle of green-leaf. *It'd be perfect, if I knew what had happened to Rainstone... Maybe I'll pick up her scent at the border and know she's back,* she thought optimistically.

But the border was clear of scent other than hers from last night and a faint trace of Rainstone from before she left. No cat had crossed the border recently though.

Suddenly she heard a faint hissing sound and she looked across the border. A pair of imploring green eyes stared at her and she recognized Rainstone's ShadowClan friend, Needlepine. "Hey, I'll finish up here if you guys go up along the border to finish," Willowwater mewed distractedly.

"Always trying to get the easiest jobs," Silverstripe sighed. "Alright, but don't take long or I'll make sure you go right back on patrol when we get to camp."

"Yes sir," Willowwater mewed with mock seriousness.

The two cats headed up the border and once they were a ways away, Willowwater darted to the ShadowClan border. "What is it? And make it snappy!" she hissed impatiently.

"Willowwater, I wanted to tell you that I picked up Rainstone's scent on patrol last night, what is she doing?" Needlepine asked.

"When did you pick up her scent?" Willowwater asked quickly, begging that it was recent and that meant Rainstone had made it out of ThunderClan territory, even though that left a whole bunch more questions to be answered.

"Before moon-high, I was hunting with a friend," Needlepine answered, dashing her hopes.

"Not since then?" Willowwater pressed.

"No... why?" Needlepine asked, looking worried.

"She left to meet Scampfur last night to explore tunnels where she thought Pinefur might be keeping his cats, but she hasn't come back," Willowwater explained anxiously.

"That doesn't sound good," Needlepine mewed anxiously, standing up and peering across over the lake toward ThunderClan territory, his muscles tensed and his eyes narrowed as if he wanted to run there and find Rainstone that moment.

He really cares for her... he didn't look like this when we met last time. Does he love her? The scandalized idea made Willowwater smirk; she could just imagine Rainstone throwing rules to the wind just like any other time.

"Look, if she isn't back by tonight, meet me here just after sunset and we'll go looking for her," Willowwater mewed, it wouldn't do any good to go now, they'd just get caught and in trouble.

Needlepine hesitated then nodded reluctantly. "Hopefully we won't need to go," he muttered, "but I'll be here."

"Good," Willowwater nodded, looking off to ThunderClan's territory. *Just hold on until tonight, Rainstone.*

...

Night came, the chirping of crickets and croaking of frogs sang the sun down to sleep while Willowwater waited with her paws digging into the sandy shore of the lake just on the border. The half-bridge rose on her shoulder, casting her in its shadow.

The foaming bubbles of the lapping waves rushed around her paws, a transparent gray with silver capped foam in the shadows. *Where's Needlepine?* It was just after sunset and she was anxious to get moving and find her friend who still hadn't returned.

Worry bit at her, the Clan had noticed and there were many rumors going around. Some cats thought Nightwing had gotten her, others said she was a coward and had run off. Willowwater grumbled when she remembered that Sunstar hadn't even sent out any patrol to look for her, just told the cats to keep a look out for her.

There's something not right... She couldn't shake off the feeling, Willowwater knew it was ridiculous and she had no evidence, but she was sure Sunstar knew more about the situation then he was letting on.

"Hey, Willowwater?" a low mew called to her from overhead and she jumped up on the Half-bridge, seeing Needlepine jump as she landed almost on his paws.

"Sorry, but let's get going," Willowwater mewed, glancing at the sky. The stains of red and orange had disappeared and the stars were appearing in the deep indigo sky. The moon was just starting to rise, bright and white; it would be full in three days.

They padded shoulder to shoulder in silence, the stones that lined the lake shore of ShadowClan territory rolled smooth and cool beneath her paws. Willowwater liked it better than the sand that got stuck in between her toes that she had to clean whenever she went down to the lake.

"Quick, hide!" Needlepine hissed quickly, nudging her to a pine tree abruptly. She didn't stop to ask as she unsheathed her front claws and scampered up quickly and quietly. Once she was disclosed in the screen of dark pine needles, she looked down to see three cats approaching Needlepine.

"Needlepine? What are you doing out here? You're not on any patrols tonight," one of the cats asked. They all looked confused, but none suspicious. Willowwater thanked StarClan that there was a clump of mushrooms at the base of the pine tree that would hide her scent.

"I couldn't sleep and went out for a walk, don't worry I'll be heading back soon," Needlepine mewed nonchalantly. Willowwater almost laughed, Needlepine was a great liar, he didn't hesitate, didn't seem

to have a fake tone, and spoke clearly and smoothly. *I thought only Rainstone could lie like that!*

The three cats shrugged and moved on and Willowater slipped down from the tree. "Wow, you're a better liar then I thought," she purred with a teasing smirk.

Needlepine rolled his eyes, "I was in the same position as Rainstone, I was living a lie for almost two moons," he pointed out, heading her back along the shore of the lake.

"I guess, still, you lie exactly like Rainstone, picked up a few tips from her, huh?" she poked fun at him.

Needlepine rolled his eyes and shook his head, "Well, I didn't know a RiverClan cat could climb like that," the ShadowClan cat teased back.

"Lucky you, I'm the only RiverClan cat that can really climb," Willowwater lifted her head proudly.

"Seriously?" Needlepine scoffed. "What about Rainstone? Can't she climb trees?" He asked.

"Hmm, maybe, I've never seen her but... Technically, she isn't a real RiverClan cat, since she was a rogue," Willowwater mewed superiorly in defense of her title.

Needlepine frowned and turned silent and Willowwater scowled at his faraway expression. She looked up as they neared the ThunderClan border, a figure was pacing up and down the shoreline near the border. "Hey, who's that?"

Needlepine peered at the figure, green eyes narrowing and steps getting faster, "I have no idea," he muttered, breaking into a run to bound up to the figure.

Willowwater followed, wondering if it was a friend or foe or if it might possibly even be Rainstone. But when she skidded to a halt it was a red and black spiky furred tom with bright amber eyes that lightened on them.

"I'm so glad you two came," the cat sighed in relief.

"Why are you here Scampfur? What happened to Rainstone? Why didn't she come back yet?" she demanded, stepping up to him threateningly.

"Calm down, w-we went into the tunnels last night and found Pinefur's cats, or whoever's cats, and then they found... us," Scampfur mewed with a tone of awkwardness to his worry.

Needlepine growled, "In other words, you got caught and she took the fall."

Scampfur started, "Y-yes, but they would have found her if they hadn't found me first, I was just a little further back in the tunnel so they came across me first," the ThunderClan tom mewed defensively.

Needlepine growled angrily, Willowwater wondered why he looked so upset; sure, he was Rainstone's friend, but not her mate or anything. "Well, what happened to her?" Willowwater asked, anxiously.

"S-she got caught. I don't even know if she's still alive, though I heard her putting up a fight..." Scampfur shivered, and Willowwater could see deep guilt in his eyes. She remembered what Rainstone had told her.

They grew up together, Rainstone even hinted that they may have even loved each other once... is he the father of her dead kits she once mentioned? Curiosity pulled at her, but she knew this wasn't the time to ask.

"Well, we need to find out," Willowwater stated, she didn't believe Rainstone was dead. That was impossible, life without her... it just wasn't even conceivable. She couldn't be gone so fast, not that fast.

"I don't know if that's a good idea, for one, the cats are bound to be on tighter guard, and also, Pinefur hasn't been seen since sunset..." Scampfur trailed off and the three cats shared apprehensive glanced.

"Scampfur, do you think you could get me into the cave? We just need to know if she's alive, then we can plan a rescue," Willowwater pressed, she hadn't come this far just to leave now, especially if her friend was alive!

Scampfur hesitated, fear in his eyes, than he gave himself a shake. "Okay, let's go, we can't leave her if she is still alive," Scampfur mewed grimly.

"I'm coming too," Needlepine growled, stepping forward. "If they've hurt her, they'll pay," he growled menacingly, glaring at nothing.

Willowwater shook her head, "No, two cats will be more discreet and we are not going to fight and Scampfur knows the tunnels better, so you stay here," Willowwater ordered, returning his glare until he gave a small nod.

"Let's go, before he changes his mind," Willowwater whispered and Scampfur led her a short ways to the tunnel, Needlepine following and taking up a guard at the entrance. Scampfur ducked into the hole and Willowwater followed warily, trying to make something out, but all was dark to the eyes.

"Keep close," Scampfur whispered, though he sounded nervous. Willowwater could hear her heavy breathing as she tried to find something as she crept forward, trying to see where she was or where she was going, or just anything.

"Are you sure we're going the right way?" Willowwater whispered, they'd been walking for a while and she'd felt openings on both sides of her more than once.

"Yes," Scampfur whispered, though he sounded uncertain.

"Ouch!" Willowwater hissed as she bumped face first into something.

"Try using your whiskers and stay quiet!" Scampfur hissed.

"Be quiet yourself!" Willowwater snapped back at the rival warrior, rubbing her now sore nose.

"Wait, do you hear that?" Scampfur whispered.

"Yeah, voices," Willowwater murmured, a distant and inaudible muttering that reminded her of far-off thunder.

"Straight ahead," Scampfur murmured nervously.

"Come on, we need to sneak there and see if Rainstone's there," Willowwater mewed determinedly, trying to hide her fear.

"And if she's not?" Scampfur questioned.

"We take a hostage and make them tell us where she is," Willowwater mewed.

"No, what if she's..." Scampfur trailed off to a shaky breath.

"Dead? No way, there's just no way," Willowwater muttered the last part to herself. She nudged Scampfur on and they moved forward cautiously, listening for the patter of other paws then their own.

They slowly crept along, and Willowwater began to see things such as the outline of Scampfur's ears ahead of her. "We're getting really close, I never went any further than this," Scampfur whispered.

Willowwater nodded tersely, even though he couldn't see it. The voices were getting louder, they sounded cocky, jeering, arrogant. Sounds of blows being felled and muffled groans of agony wrenched at Willowwater's heart, for she knew those groans.

What are those monsters doing to her? She thought furiously, she could see Scampfur was trembling, either from rage or guilt, or both. They crouched in a corner, they could see the entire moonlit cave but no cat could see them.

There she is, she thought in agonized wondering. The cave was crowded with cats, many slept or dozed in the corners, but one corner under a cleft in the wall where a guard stood was a lump of very dark gray fur that hardly looked recognizable, if not for her expression.

It was a stolid expression, one that didn't register pain as one of her

captor's claws at her and pounded her head with a hefty blow. A disapproving scowl was on her face but her dark blue, almost black looking, saw everything.

Rainstone was there, she was alive, and it looked like they were going to keep her alive, for now. Willowwater could have sighed in relief. But she tensed as Rainstone's eyes landed lightly on her, they didn't stare but swept on, they didn't betray anything, not relief or surprise or anything, they were carefully blank.

She's too good at this, Willowwater thought admiringly. But then she studied Rainstone's pelt, it was covered with wounds, open wounds, thanks to the constant harassing. There was a bleeding cut on her cheek and a long, straight scratch down the middle of her right eye, swelling it almost closed.

Hurting a cat that can't hope to defend herself against so many cats, its cowardliness! She thought furiously. "Hey, someone's coming," Scampfur whispered and Willowwater jumped in panic, wondering if they were about to be trapped.

But a cat appeared out of a tunnel on the other side of the cave. It was Pinefur, the ThunderClan deputy; Willowwater had seen his snake-like eyes more than once at a gathering and thought he looked like he belonged crawling underground.

The cats quieted and stood still as Pinefur made his way through them, heading for Rainstone. "My dear," he cackled, planting himself over the slumped figure. Rainstone didn't respond, just looked up at him with a guarded look.

"It's wonderful to see you again, though you seem to be in worst shape then this morning," the deputy snickered mockingly.

Still Rainstone was silent, though she pushed herself into a dignified sitting position, trying to fully open her swollen eye.

"Well, it's all settled, kitten, Nightwing will come to personally finish you off on the full moon, so you have three nights to make peace," the sick cat laughed, a laugh that reminded Willowwater of a sick fox.

Rainstone tilted her head, "I'm honored, he thinks so highly of me to trek across the lake just for me. I'll have to give him my thanks," the she-cat mewed smoothly and Willowwater wondered how she wasn't spitting hatred.

Pinefur gave a regretful sigh, "It really is a shame that you sided with the Clans, I could have really used you."

"Who said I sided with the Clans?" Rainstone asked with a note of puzzlement.

"Then why were you sneaking around and spying?" Pinefur countered.

"Amusement, I'm a creature of such daring. It is my nature and my life, to stop just because I happened upon here would be unthinkable," Rainstone mewed with finality.

"Well, it seems that your adventure has come to an end, rest well," Pinefur chuckled turning away and toward the tunnel Willowwater was in.

With a gasp, she jumped to her paws and followed Scampfur silently and swiftly out of the tunnels, bursting out and dragging a confused Needlepine away before Pinefur would emerge.

"What happened?" Needlepine demanded once they were back to the border.

Willowwater sighed and shook her head as Scampfur explained the sticky situation. "This is going to be hard, we won't be able to rescue her out of there, but she won't be leaving the cave until she's dead," she growled.

Needlepine's eyes glinted, "You said there were a lot of cats, right? Were they all black furred?"

Willowwater frowned, confused, and shook her head, 'no.'

"Then we've got a chance," the ShadowClan tom mewed excitedly.

"What do you mean?" Scampfur asked, obviously as puzzled as she

was.

"Nightwing *only* had black cats, and my impression is that he thinks the same for Pinefur. Pinefur's just using Nigthwing for extra strength, which means Pinefur won't have Nightwing go down into the cave and find him out right now. They will bring Rainstone out of the tunnels, guarded no doubt, and have Nightwing kill her somewhere up here, that's when we can rescue her," Needlepine mewed with satisfaction.

Willowwater was perplexed, "It's a good thought, but... there's just so much guess work, we don't know that Nightwing doesn't know about Pinefur's colorful cats, also, Pinefur might just clear all cats without black fur out of that tunnel," she mewed.

Scampfur nodded, "And even if what you said is true, which tunnel will they use and what entrance will they come out of? There are several just in ThunderClan territory," the red and black tom mewed with a sigh.

Needlepine lashed his tail in frustration, "Think about it! How else are we going to do this? And Nightwing will probably come the same way we did; they'll probably use the same tunnel you two were using. This will work! I know it will!" the ShadowClan tom mewed firmly.

Willowwater wasn't sure about that, but she didn't have a better idea, and neither did Scampfur. "Okay, we'll do it your way unless we come up with something better," she consented.

"Let's all meet here just after sunset the night of the full moon , we need to be here before Nightwing is," Scampfur mewed.

Willowwater nodded in agreement. She hated having to leave her friend behind, but in such a sticky situation, no, a deadly situation, there was no choice. *Hold on, Rainstone, I know you have it in you to make it through, and I promise I'll never let any cat get you again after this.*

Chapter 38: Night Gone Wrong

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Damn. Rainstone didn't usually swear or cuss even, mostly because that's the kind of language she'd grown up in and she'd always hated it. But right now, to Rainstone, she felt free to think the word that fit her situation perfectly.

The cats had finally left her in peace for a while, and she had taken to opportunity to rest since she hadn't slept since the morning before she investigated the caves. She'd been in the caves four days now and she'd been keeling over in exhaustion as the cats jeered and scratched at her.

My eye hurts so much... She'd been given a well-marked scar over her eye, courtesy of Pinefur, said he liked marking his victims. The tom definitely lived up to her expectations; cruel, heartless, and had an odd fascination in the misery of others.

However, she wasn't one to waste an opportunity and had been memorizing the cats, their scents, their territory based on what they said, what they talked about to one another when they thought she wasn't listening. *But I still have the problem of escaping...*

She sighed, tonight was the full moon. She'd already attempted an escape... it hadn't ended well. It was between guards switching in the night, and she'd made a break for it, she'd almost, it'd been so close, but they'd caught her. She'd been injured and exhausted and her broken paw had hindered her, she simply hadn't been fast enough.

I knew that paw would cause me serious trouble one day! Growling to herself in misery, she felt despair, her last chance would be to escape when they took her out of the tunnels, she'd heard the plan relayed. They'd thought she couldn't hear, but she'd grown up in the mountains, her ears were sharper then the Clan cats.

I'll have to escape, somehow, Pinefur will no doubt have his six black cats guard me, and will I be able to escape them when they're going to be on their best guard? She also hadn't forgotten seeing Willowwater and Scampfur after her first day stuck in the moon cave, but she hadn't seen them since and wondered if they were planning a rescue for tonight.

Half of me hopes they will, half of me hopes they just stay out of it and allow me to take care of myself. Heck, how am I going to take care of this by myself? She ran several thoughts and plans through her mind, most of which had already crossed her mind. She really felt like she had played every possible scenario, from dying to triumphantly destroying Pinefur's cats. The latter was completely ridiculous even to her.

But there has to be some way, right? I can't just be stuck here, there's something I can do! So what is it? Growling, she scratched her claws on the stone floor, getting a quick glance from the cats around her before they continued on their way.

She looked at her fur, it was almost back to the normal dark gray tinted blue, mostly due to the cats dunking her in the underground river until they discovered she could swim and went to different methods of exhausting her. *But, they know I'm in RiverClan... even if I do escape, what do I do when I get home? I'll just put more cats like Patchkit in danger...*

Confusion and worry swept over her, *Song told me to stay with the Clans, but how can I when I'm causing more problems than fixing them?* She shook her head, the light told her it was sun-high, and she had a while until it was show-time.

I'll just have to go with instinct, I'll either live, or I'll die and be with Song, my kits, and Dusty again... that doesn't sound so bad. Then she slept and dreamed.

"Rainstone!" said she-cat jumped, looking around, confused when she saw she wasn't in the moon cave but on a tall hill that overlooked the Clans four territories.

"W-where am I?" she stuttered, turning, then realized that she could

feel the grass on all four paws. She looked at her broken paw, it flexed and moved and then she understood. *It's a dream, but who was calling?* Turning, she saw Song, the ancient and windy black she-cat with sharp amber eyes.

"What do you think you're doing?" the ancient cat asked with a silky tongue that had a sharp edge.

"Trying not to die," Rainstone scowled, recognizing the disapproving tone in the voice.

"But what are you trying to do in the Clans? What's driving you to help them? Why do you care?" Song pressed.

Rainstone held her breath, letting it out slowly. "That's a lot of questions," she growled.

"They're all the same; why do you do what you do? That's a question you're going to need to answer before you can win. A cat with no rhyme or reason starts out on a mission destined to fail, whether or not she lives or dies. If you have a reason, even if you die, there will be some cat to carry on your unfinished quest," Song mewed gently.

Rainstone looked at her paws, "You're talking about the mountains?"

Song nodded once, eyes never leaving hers. "You left the mountains; you are incapable of saving the cats there. But if you focus your life, you may just be able to pass the mission on to another," Song mewed.

Rainstone shook her head, "But the Clan cats... they come from such a different perspective... they wouldn't be able to do it," she sighed.

"Don't be so sure, the Clan cats are a younger kind then those in the mountains, they are still capable of wide-eyed views and a journey with nothing but the word of a friend," Song mewed quietly, eyes taking on a far-off look.

Rainstone frowned, she couldn't save the mountain cats, but the *Clan* cats could? "Can you tell me something? Do I have to stay in

the Clans?" she asked, feeling unsure that the Clans were the best place for her.

Song leaned forward and brushed her chin over the top of Rainstone's head, "Stay just two more moons. And when you leave, you will be taking something with you," Song mewed softly and things started to turn fuzzy. Wind rushed around her, blinding her and lifting off her paws.

When she opened her eyes, she was lying on her side on the moon cave; the dim red light told her dusk was almost over. The five black cats Pinefur had in his group were gathered not far from her. *So I was right, Pinefur's just playing with the black cat junk, he's just using Nightwing so that he has a force on the other side of the lake.*

"Well, hope you're ready to die," the sick chuckle trickled down her spine like ice despite her best efforts to ignore it.

"Can you save the talking until after I'm dead?" she complained, rolling her eyes at Pinefur.

"Wouldn't that be rude?" Pinefur purred, gosh, he sounded worse than a dying dog.

"Not if I'm the one who requested it," Rainstone muttered, looking at him with narrowed eyes.

"Such an unfriendly gaze! Ah, but I suppose it can't be helped, hmm?" Pinefur cackled. He really needed to work on his laugh. It was the kind of sound that'd give kits nightmares for moons.

"It's not unfriendly, it's spiteful, and I really don't know why you'd expect anything different," Rainstone sighed in annoyance.

Pinefur just laughed, "Well, I'm off to the gathering, luckily, this'll be the last time I see you," then he walked off, head in the air as if he had said something as simple as goodnight. In a way, he had.

Then the black cats gathered around her, nudging her roughly to her paws. They looked annoyed, a little disgusted, as she hobbled slowly into the tunnel they led her into.

"Look, if you try anything funny, we will kill you," one of the cats in front of her growled as they entered the pitch black tunnel.

"Are you kidding me? She's not going to be able to try anything!" a cat scoffed form behind her.

That's right, fall for my sham. She was faking her limping and she made her breathing get harder and more ragged as they went on, she also made herself trip and fall a few times. It hurt a little, but it would definitely convince these cats she wouldn't be trying anything. It was also believable because they had only fed her twice in the past four days and they'd been continuously harassing her.

Finally they came out of the tunnels and the first thing Rainstone did was breath in the scents. It was wild scents. They weren't in Clan territory. *Well, that crosses off a rescue plan, there's no way they could know which tunnel I'd come out of.*

She was nudged forward and she eyed her surroundings without moving her head. The terrain was rocky with spots of sand and desert shrubbery popping out along with spots of green grass and trees. *Past WindClan territory?* She'd never been there before, but she'd seen the deserted plains from RiverClan territory and Flickertail had told her that the Moonpool was up a rocky slope.

So back to the lake would be downhill... I think. Frowning, she was seated down by the black cats who took up a ring around her. The sun was just disappearing and a chill breeze ran down the slope as they sat in the shadows.

The moon was already rising, full and bright, a star that had been expanded and dimpled until it was sitting right in front of her. Her heart tugged, the moon seemed so far away here compared to the mountains, but it still filled her with the same sense of wondrous delight she had risked under pain of punishment to witness.

It's always there... And it gave her a sense of peace, no matter what, no matter where she went, no matter what changed, it'd always be there, a constant companion; just like the sunrise, like the seasons, like the wind, like the water...

"*What are you doing this for*?" the question she'd been posed by Song stuck in her mind and she swallowed hard. She'd asked herself the question, and had never really answered back, giving the excuse of curiosity and lustful daring that seemed to be so entwined with her that it was her nature.

But... what am I really doing this for? When she thought about it, a few images came to mind, Flickertail caring for her, Willowwater laughing with her, Sweetberry training her, Sunstar accepting her, and most of all, she saw Needlepine over and over, sleeping, fighting, eating, running, in many different expressions and different situations.

She frowned as her heart glowed, *do I love him? I don't know why I should. And he'd never love me back, Clan cats are picky about a cat's alliance, but... maybe I could grow to love him, if I just had the chance...* She wondered if she'd just answered her question, *am I doing this for the friends I love?*

She glowed with warmth as she thought of their happy, carefree expressions. She was doing this so that they could keep being happy, even if she wasn't there to be happy with them. Feeling more determined and strong now that she had a firm resole, her first firm resolve since she'd left the mountains, she ran her plan through her mind once more.

When Nightwing comes along, he'll no doubt want a fight, he loves fighting and showing his superiority, the guards will have to step back for the fight, it'll be easy enough to make a break for it... unfortunately; running isn't my strong suit with this broken paw but... I've noticed my stamina is much higher than the Clan cats, so I should be able to out-pace them eventually with some luck.

She nodded, it was risky, to say the least, but it was a plan, and in this kind of situation, there was no safe plan. *But I'll make it, I have to, for all my friends, besides, Song almost promised that'd I'd live two more moons at the very least...*

Her ears twitched as she heard a rustling paw-step. None of the other cats had heard it and she took the opportunity to gather all her strength and energy and all her learned skills. *I'm weak, I can*

feel it in my limbs and empty belly... but I don't need to beat Nightwing, I just need to stun him long enough to run for it.

She turned her head toward where Nightwing was approaching and narrowed her eyes as he stepped past a boulder and into the small clearing. *Okay, one side has rocks too steep to climb, the other, too steep to climb quickly, one side is a fall straight down, and then there's the passage, this is going to make it more difficult...*

"Good, you are here," Nightwing growled, looking more irritated than usual.

"Sorry, but I'm afraid I can't return the greeting," Rainstone answered, playing her part as she continued thinking about escaping without showing any eagerness.

"You seem awfully composed," Nightwing growled, narrowing his brown eyes suspiciously.

"You seem awfully troubled," Rainstone countered.

"You look different," Nightwing growled, eyes skimming over her and she rolled her eyes.

"Tell me when you figure it out," Rainstone sighed.

"Your fur... it's not really black... how did you? No... it's you!" Nightwing jerked straight up and eyes widening.

"Honestly, I was surprised you didn't recognize me by my scent when I joined the group," Rainstone mewed, guessing he'd recognized her.

"You-you're the cat that stopped me from getting that black RiverClan kit, what was your name? Oh yes, it was Rainstone," Nightwing mewed, a slight purr in his voice. "I thought your fighting style seemed familiar," he laughed.

"Thank goodness you finally figured it out, I was afraid your stupidity was going to cross into new regions," Rainstone sighed.

"Brave words for a cat in your condition," Nightwing mewed, sitting

down across form her and she rolled her eyes. *He's seriously going to have a chat with me before attempting to kill me?*

"Actually, I was quite surprised that you thought so highly of me to come all this way just for me," Rainstone gave him a mockingly pleased look and Nightwing scowled.

"I didn't trust anyone else to finish you. You were quite the popular cat and sneakier than a snake," Nightwing growled.

"Speaking of slyness," Rainstone smirked, giving the black cats guarding her a knowing look, "It's sad when you don't know how badly you're being played." The black cats tensed around her and gave her shocked and angry looks.

"What do you mean?" Nightwing asked inquisitively, eyes curious as he leaned forward.

"Hurry up and kill her before I do," one of the black cats growled harshly.

That's right, make him suspicious, Nightwing's not an idiot; he'll realize something is going on and there will be fighting between the two groups, Nightwing won't stand a chance and he'll be out of attempting taking over the Clans. Rainstone knew exactly how such a thing could play out, but right now she had to focus on staying alive.

"Keep you claws in, I'm getting to it, but she was just about to tell me something," Nightwing smirked and his eyes glinted warningly. *So, he already had his suspicions.*

"Please, let's just get on with it," Rainstone sighed.

"You seem in an awful hurry to die," Nightwing commented.

"And you seem in an awful hesitance to kill me," Rainstone snapped back then sighed. "We just keep going round and around, let's get something done please."

"Fine," Nightwing shrugged, standing up and waving his tail for the others to get back. *Perfect, you couldn't make it easier*, she thought as the black cats gathered to her back, now only Nightwing was in the

way for her escape.

He leapt like a black flash in the fading gray light, claws aiming for her throat, obviously guessing from her appearance she wouldn't be able to dodge fast enough. But she did, ducking and twisting away without even moving more than two paces.

"Know that my honor prevents me from making this easy for you," she growled, darkening her gaze into a formidable presence. Nightwing looked back at her, brown paws dark against the ground.

"Sounds like fun," he swiped his tongue over his muzzle with a kind of lust for battle.

"Your move," Rainstone growled, getting to her paws and taking a ready stance, her usual tactics she'd kept hidden as best she could while training with Nightwing, she'd fought with the real Pepper's style, this would be different.

Nightwing seemed to notice the change and narrowed his eyes. He leapt and she twisted around like the breeze, dancing right past him. That's how she'd learned to fight, since Pepper was so fast, but her own strength manifested in her attacks.

"You're one talented fighter, it really is such a waste," Nightwing mewed.

"Too bad for you," Rainstone mewed, now she was on the side of the exit passage.

"But it's all in vain, even if I can't end you, there is no way you can defeat six of us," Nightwing growled, running and sliding, aiming to hit her jaw in an upsweep move.

Rainstone leaned back and fell on her back, her back legs now able to fight. "Who said anything about defeating you?" she scowled, eyes narrowed and Nightwing suddenly seemed to realize something as she kicked with her back legs, throwing him into the five black cats that stood in a line on the other side.

She jumped and ran, shouts and yowls involving curses rising from behind her as she raced down the rocky slope at a neck-break

speed. *If I fall here, I'm dead*, she thought as she huffed, running and skidding and sliding while keeping her paws at all times over the treacherous terrain that involved leaping from one precarious perch on a boulder to the next without pausing.

Lucky for me I grew up in the mountains, it's like playing back home, I can gain a distance here that I would have lost on a flat surface, she thought, thanking her good luck. She could hear them chasing her in the distance, they were falling behind, but they were still there.

I just have to hope they don't chase me into Clan territory, she thought anxiously, if they caught her, they'd kill her instantly and she knew she didn't have the strength to fight more than one cat. But now she was out of the rocks and she darted full-out over the slope, it was WindClan territory, she knew the scent, ThunderClan territory wasn't too far to the side.

Maybe I can lose them in that jungle, there's no way I can sprint over all of WindClan's territory and out-pace them. She turned and leapt over the little stream between the two territories. "Gah!" she gasped as her broken paw slipped as she landed and twisted painfully.

No, not now! I was doing so well! She begged and forced herself into a run, but her leg refused to run without a limp and she exhausted her little energy more as she clamored through the dense forest.

She could hear the cats; they were closer now, but more confused. They were losing her in this shadowy place and she just hoped it'd keep up long enough for her to escape into ShadowClan territory, than she could climb a tree and wait them out.

She was almost through ThunderClan territory now, safety and hope playing in her vision. She gasped, biting her tongue to stop from screeching as she scratched her already scratched eye on a bramble thicket. She huffed and fell on the ground as something snaked along her leg and tripped her.

"What was that? Are they coming?" worried and scared voices sounded ahead, but they were familiar, happily familiar. She wanted to call out to them, but she could still hear her pursuers. *C'mon, if I can make it to them, I know I can get out of this!*

She pulled her leg painfully out and raced forward, bursting through a bunch of ferns and sending all three cats into the air in surprise. She closed her eyes in relief and purred, "I've never been so happy to see you guys," she laughed weakly.

Instantly, two shoulders were pressed against her, supporting her nearly collapsing legs. The three cats, Willowwater, Needlepine, and Scampfur, who had been waiting to rescue her in a completely different set of circumstances, started pestering her with questions but all she could hear were the paw-steps of her pursuers.

"Quickly! They're coming, we need to get out of here, we can't beat them," Rainstone panted nodding toward the ShadowClan border.

The cats' eyes widened in fear and they started forward, hurriedly and anxiously as they started to hear the small noises of the pursuers. Needlepine and Willowwater supported her form the sides and Scampfur kept look-out in the back.

Rainstone lifted her tired eyes to see the ShadowClan border, the safe dark refuge that they could disappear in. "Almost there," she breathed to herself, forcing her legs to help propel herself forward.

"Not so fast," a voice growled and a shape dropped down from in front of them. It was Nightwing.

"No! How'd he get in front of us?!" Needlepine gasped, looking over his shoulder and stiffening. Rainstone had already sensed them; the six black cats had surrounded them with growls and snarls.

"Hand over the cat and we might let you live for now," Nightwing scowled and the five black cats chuckled.

"No, way!" Willowwater hissed.

"Then you'll end up like your other friend," Nightwing laughed and all three cats stiffened, looking around for Scampfur who was no longer with them.

They turned around and Rainstone gaped as she saw one of the cats fling a lump of red and black fur at her paws. *No, no way...* She was trembling in shock and horror as her belly twisted in unbelieving

terror and unknown tears fell from her eyes as her mouth trembled.

Willowwater was shaking with shock and fear while Needlepine took a deep breath, letting it out in vibration as he shivered against her. Rainstone's tired head nodded and she was sure she would have collapsed if she wasn't already being held up.

No, she cried silently, feeling the tears blur her vision, *I know I don't love him anymore, but I loved him once and I really did want him to be happy! No matter how much it hurt me, how did this happen? How did tonight go so wrong?*

Scampfur's red and black furred sides didn't rise with breath and the blood that trickled away from his mouth had no life behind it while the deadly wound that tore his belly open and had ripped his life away continued to redden the moonlit grass.

Chapter 39: Not Quite Gone

Chapter 39: Not Quite Gone

Scampfur's lifeless red and black body lay silent on the ground, dark blood pooling and staining the feather-soft grass. Rainstone was shaking, horror and guilt racing through her mind. *No! He can't be dead! He had a mate and kits! I should've been the one to die. Oh! Why did I ask for his help? Why did I get him involved? He should be in his nest, curled around his mate and kits! Not lying so still on the ground! There shouldn't be blood pouring from his body, this shouldn't have happened!*

She was trembling harder, unable to pull her eyes away from the face of the cat that had once brought her so much happiness and later caused her pain. Willowwater's eyes were wide from shock but her gaze was focused on the surrounding enemies, Needlepine was doing likewise.

"You don't stand a chance against us," Nightwing growled, eyes narrowed and angry. He waved his tail at the five other black cats and they pressed in closer.

"Rainstone! We need your help now, grieve later!" Needlepine's insistent voice hissed into her ear and it snapped her out of her numb shock. Rainstone flicked her eyes around, looking for an opening chance. *Got it.*

"Don't move," she whispered to her two cats, waving them away from her and standing on her own paws again. With her eyes focused on Nightwing, she knew she had to time this right. Leaping suddenly, she bowled into Nightwing and had him pinned firmly before he could react.

"No one move!" she commanded loudly in an icy voice, claws pressed up against a hissing Nightwing's throat. No cat moved and it was deathly silent for a moment, then one of Pinefur's black cats narrowed his blue eyes at her.

"You can't win, to get away you need to release Nightwing and you can't outrun us," the cat growled triumphantly.

"Willowwater, Needlepine, move fast," Rainstone ordered in the same cold voice. They gave her perplexed looks but complied and moved a safe distance toward the ShadowClan border.

"You still haven't solved the problem," the black cat mewed, narrowing his eyes triumphantly.

"Are you sure?" Rainstone asked, looking coldly down at Nightwing, with a strike to his leg he let out a low moan of pain as she matched it with a gash to his other leg. Now, he wouldn't be able to run after her.

"We can still get you," the black cat growled angrily.

"Perhaps," Rainstone purred, glaring at them threateningly. "But if you do, I'll tell Nightwing about our little... *secret*," she was talking about how Pinefur was deceiving Nightwing and from the mingled expressions of anger and fear, they needed to keep it a secret for now.

"So if you attack me when I let go of Nightwing, I'll shout it out to the midnight sky, and if you kill me before I tell him, I'll have one of my friends," she jerked her head at Willowwater and Needlepine, "Tell him back at his camp," she laughed and the black cats growled in confusion, unsure what to do. "I imagine Pinefur wouldn't let you live if you let me tell Nightwing, so now it comes between your lives and mine, which is more important?"

She let them ponder that for a moment as she broke away, she made it to Willowwater and Needlepine, hissing at them to run, before she heard the pound of pursuers. She looked back and saw that two cats were hauling Nightwing away while the other three chased them. *So that he can't hear me say anything, clever*, she thought, but now they had to outrun or hide from them.

"C'mon, climb," she hissed through the pain of her broken paw as soon as they were swallowed by the shadows of the pine forest. She couldn't hope to outrun them even if the other two Clan cats could,

and she doubted they'd leave her behind.

Willowwater shot up a tree quickly and Needlepine launched up the same tree that Rainstone headed for, helping her up into the screen of needles a heartbeat before the pursuers raced underneath them. "Do we move now?" Needlepine breathed.

Rainstone was suddenly aware she was pressed against him and she flushed in embarrassment and happiness. It was an odd feeling while still in a state of sorrow and shock after Scampfur's death. "No, not until they go back this way," she breathed, narrowing her eyes, they'd give up fast since they were in Clan territory, and she didn't want to risk encountering them on the way back to RiverClan.

It was a few minutes later that the three scowling black cats slunk back almost directly beneath them. "Now we go," she whispered, letting out a long breath of relief when a few minutes had passed since the paw-steps had faded.

She shakily climbed down from the branch she'd been perched on with Needlepine and she almost collapsed as her paws hit solid ground, her last bit of strength lost. "Rainstone!" Needlepine was propping her up with his shoulder against her side in one instant, concerned green eyes boring into her gaze.

"I'm just tired," she sighed, her eyes forcing themselves closed.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of you," Needlepine whispered. "Willowwater! Help me carry Rainstone!" he called more loudly, but still in a hushed tone.

Rainstone felt another support at her shoulder and then her paws were lifted from the ground. The rocking movements of walking made Rainstone think of the waves of the lake as the sensation washed over her tired mind over and over again.

Finally she felt herself be set down even though she was half-asleep, so she didn't react right away or recognize the rickety wood boards beneath her paws as the dock between RiverClan and ShadowClan.

"Are we here?" she yawned, head heavy with exhaustion and heart heavy with pain.

"Yep," Willowwater said shakily, she released her pressure on Rainstone's shoulder and the still dozing she-cat fell onto the ground.

"You okay?" Rainstone asked in a murmur, determined to keep the tremble from her voice.

"N-no?" Willowwater answered with a cry in her voice. "Scampfur died! And we left him behind! He won't even get a proper vigil and his Clan-mates will never know what happened to him! His mate won't know! His kits won't know! Not until they meet him in StarClan anyways," Willowwater cried in guilt.

Rainstone realized something, eyes still closed, that even though Clan-cats were unreasonably hostile across border lines, they all shared the same sense of honor and spirit. *They fight because they know their weakness and see the other's strength, not because they simply hate everyone not in their Clan.*

It was a piece of knowledge she'd been lacking in and she made her decision. She forced her eyes open and straightened into a sitting position, huffing and leaning heavily on Needlepine, head resting on his shoulder but eyes fixed on Willowwater.

"I need you to do something for me," she mewed slowly, knowing Willowwater wouldn't take this well.

"W-what?" Willowwater asked, trying to stop her sobbing and wiping her crying eyes with a paw.

"Tell RiverClan that I'm dead," she mewed quietly, feeling Needlepine flinch against her and Willowwater stared at her in horror.

"What did you say?" Willowwater asked disbelievingly.

"Tell the Clan I'm dead, I'm not returning. Not until Pinefur and Nightwing are taken down," Rainstone mewed; she couldn't keep risking her Clan-mates lives with her risks.

"Y-you're leaving the Clan?" Willowwater cried with eyes wide with sorrow.

"Yes, at least for now," Rainstone admitted.

"I won't be seeing you anymore?" Willowwater cried and Rainstone smirked.

"Of course you will! I can't do this on my own, I'll stay in touch with you and Needlepine, I need you to tell me what's going on in RiverClan and the other Clans while I start breaking Nightwing down," Rainstone mewed.

"On your own?" Willowwater questioned, Needlepine just stared at her with a stolid expression.

"What did I just say?" Rainstone sighed. "No, not on my own, it'll take the Clans help to defeat Pinefur, but if I can break down Nightwing, that's one less problem to deal with," she mewed; she wasn't foolish enough to try to take down Pinefur's cats.

"Where will you be?" Needlepine spoke up.

"Around the lake, I'll find out all the info we need and the battle plans, let the other Clans know what's going on as well. Nothing fancy, but it'll be important in the long run," Rainstone mewed.

"O-okay," Willowwater mewed, she obviously wanted to argue against it but knew better then to do so. "But you're hurt, how will you take care of yourself?"

"Once I rest I'll manage just fine, I'll stick close to RiverClan territory for a while, just in case I need your help. And Needlepine," she turned to the tom, "I'll call for your help if I need it as well, so be ready," she warned.

The two cats nodded and she forced herself to stand up, even though all her legs trembled with effort. She looked across the lake at the rising sun and the mist rising off the lake. *I'm going to be gone, but not leaving, not for two moons at least. This is how it is.*

... Willowwater's POV ...

Stupid Rainstone, stupid Pinefur, Stupid Nightwing... Willowwater huffed angrily as she chewed on a fish in agitation. It'd been three days since Rainstone had asked her to tell the Clan she was dead. The deed had been done. Honestly, only Sweetberry and Flickertail had grieved, though most other cats wore a sad face for a while.

Why did she make me do that? It had been heart wrenching to lie to her Clan in that way, she'd hated it. And not only that, but she'd been so worried about Rainstone, considering she'd left the she-cat looking half-dead, that she'd spent a day looking for her, finding her near the Horseplace on the WindClan border.

She was looking much better though... Rainstone had been looking almost completely healthy, if not for her broken paw and still tired eyes. *Why does she act like she needs to protect everyone all the time?* Willowwater thought angrily, munching again on the fish.

She sighed; she knew she was just worried, and that Rainstone was just doing what she knew she could do. *But... I still don't like Sunstar's behavior about this*. She looked around the camp, spotting her leader watching over the Clan with pride in his eyes.

Her fur prickled uneasily, *he's not a traitor... but he's hiding something*, she thought uncomfortably. Willowwater turned her thoughts back to Rainstone. *Did she really need to leave the Clan?* She knew that Rainstone just wanted to stay hidden for the time being and not risk the lives of RiverClan cats, but it still seemed unfair.

Will she ever come back? That was the tough question for Willowwater, even when this was all done and resolved, Rainstone was always so... antsy, she wasn't the kind of cat that could settle into a peaceful life. *It's almost like she needs adventure to live.*

Willowwater thought about it a while longer, waiting until sun-high was over as she finished her meal and dozed in the warm sun, the calming babble of the streams filling her ears over the murmuring of voices.

"Willowwater!" she almost jumped out of her fur at Mintbreeze's sudden voice cutting through her dozing thoughts.

"Yes?" she asked nervously, looking carefully at the intimidating deputy.

"Go to Sunstar's den, we need to talk to you," Mintbreeze mewed in calm authority, pale green eyes unreadable.

"O-okay," Willowwater slunk away under Mintbreeze's tight gaze. *Gosh, that cat is intense!*

She saw Mintbreeze also send Stormfang and Silverstripe after her and she relaxed, chances were she wasn't in trouble. She slid into Sunstar's den, sitting down facing the large, dark yellow leader. His orange gaze was friendly and she returned his nod of greeting.

Unlike most Clan cats, she'd never really developed deep feelings of trust or respect for her leader; she assumed it was because of all the death and uncertainty that had surrounded the Clan when she was little. But she did hold Sunstar in high regard because of what the other cats told her.

Stormfang appeared after a few moments followed by Silverstripe and Mintbreeze and they all situated themselves in the now cramped den. Willowwater sent Stormfang a quick glance, the creamy she-cat had dark brown stripes and amber eyed; she was Silverstripe's sister and that made her Willowwater's aunt.

Not that she had ever been close to her kin, and she wasn't going to start now as she faced her leader, waiting for an explanation. "I want to visit ThunderClan and you three are to escort me," Sunstar announced, eyes serious.

Silverstripe and Stormfang shared confused looks and Willowwater narrowed her eyes suspiciously, the events of a few nights ago flashing in her mind. *Besides that, it was the gathering on that night, what is it that's calling him half-way across the lake? Pinefur perhaps?* She still was sure Sunstar had some kind of connection to Pinefur's doings, whether good or bad she wasn't willing to judge.

"Can we ask why?" Willowwater asked first and Silverstripe gave his daughter a disapproving look, though she knew he wanted to know just as much as she did.

"I need to discuss something Stormstar that I didn't have time to talk about at the gathering, it is very important," Sunstar answered in a low voice, warning no further inquisition. Willowwater decided to satisfy herself with that for the moment, but wasn't willing to stop there.

"Do we leave immediately?" Stormfang asked, amber eyes still confused but determined.

Willowwater held her breath and looked at Sunstar eagerly for the answer, if they didn't leave right away; she had the chance to tell Rainstone about this. She was sure her friend would be able to find some hidden meaning in this that might help her find the information she was after.

"Yes, go get your travelling herbs from Flickertail, it's a long journey," Sunstar ordered and Willowwater headed out, disappointed. *Well, I'll just have to remember everything for Rainstone! No matter how insignificant it seems!*

She lapped up the travelling herb bundle Flickertail gave her, yacking at the taste it left in her mouth. *Blek! Hope I never taste that again!* She swiped her tongue over her muzzle to get rid of the taste in her mouth. Stormfang gave her an amused glance.

"It never gets better," the older she-cat laughed. Willowwater gave her an amused look but didn't respond as she headed to the entrance to await Sunstar. He arrived not long after and led them out quickly.

No cat talked as they travelled quickly to WindClan's border. They stopped at the scent marks and Sunstar lifted his head, "Let's go down to the lake, we are allowed to travel within two tail-lengths of the water," the leader announced.

The cats nodded and followed him as he turned down to the lake, but Willowwater paused, catching a familiar scent. "What are you doing?" a familiar voice hissed once the other cats were out of ear-shot.

"Sunstar wants to go visit Stormstar of ThunderClan," Willowwater

answered quietly, looking around for Rainstone.

"Really? Hmm..." Rainstone voice came from behind her but Willowwater still didn't see her on the empty slope. "I'll have to see what that's about, but don't look for me!" Rainstone laughed lightly and her voice faded as Willowwater heard Silverstripe's call for her to hurry up. *No, I probably won't see you, but I'll look!*

They continued the rest of the way in silence, passing through WindClan's territory, although nervously, without incident. Willowwater's fur started prickling as she breathed in the musty ThunderClan forest, memories of Scampfur's belly being ripped out and his blood leaking into the ground crowded her mind.

Did they catch my scent where Scampfur died? What if I get in trouble? Though she found it highly unlikely they'd detect her scent past the scents of blood and all those rouges. They'd most likely have correctly guessed that rogues had killed Scampfur. She still shivered though.

"Who goes there?!" a commanding call halted them, even though they were still on the lakeshore.

Willowwater's fur stood up as they faced the ThunderClan patrol, it was the warriors Applefang, Sunstorm, and Spiritstorm, led by none other than Pinefur. A scowl twitched on her lips and her claws slid out in agitation.

"Calm down! We're not here to fight!" Silverstripe whispered to her harshly. With great self-control, she forced her claws sheathed and her fur to flatten slightly.

"We are here to speak to Stormstar," Sunstar announced, stepping up to Pinefur who greeted the leader courteously, sickly green eyes amused as they alighted over her. *Does he know who I am?* The thought thudded in her chest until he gave similar looks to the other RiverClan cats. *No, we've never faced each other before, and the rogues wouldn't recognize me, Nightwing may just be able to tell Pinefur that I'm a RiverClan cat, but nothing else.*

"Of course, I will bring Stormstar here, if you desire to talk," Pinefur

mewed, narrowing his eyes. "Watch them," he snapped at his warriors before disappearing into the dense foliage.

"So we just wait here?" Willowwater muttered to herself, sitting down crossly as unease itched at her. She eyed the three ThunderClan cats; another two had joined the forces, sent by Pinefur no doubt. Those two were Thornfur and a tom apprentice, Willowwater supposed it must be Vinepaw.

She eyed the expressions of the rival cats in the tense silence. Applefang was watching them through suspicious blue eyes; Sunstorm looked like he was dozing, though his ears were pricked, listening to the forest. Thornfur was murmuring something to his apprentice who listened with wide attentive eyes. *He must be nearing his warrior assessment though... he was apprenticed around the time I was made a warrior, it's been almost six moons.*

She then laid her eyes on Spiritstorm, she'd always been intrigued by the three sisters and their interesting names. *Spiritstorm, Wanderheart, and Wispheart... Now that I think about it, Wispheart is Scampfur's mate... err, was his mate.* Willowwater looked at her paws, if only she had taken the rear look-out! She would have made it... she knew she would have survived.

The silver tabby looked straight at her with ice-blue eyes, they looked sad, *probably grieving for her sister's loss*. But the fear in them scared Willowwater, *what is she afraid of?*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of Pinefur and Stormstar. She looked at the ThunderClan leader respectfully. Although she was the leader of a rival Clan, Stormstar's dedication to the warrior-code, and thus all four Clans, had kept the Clans at peace and in prosperity for moons.

Unfortunately, now that the leader was aging and growing less of a power as she withdrew to just taking care of her own Clan, relations were growing unsteady as no other leader stepped up to reach across the borders. That gap in power was probably what had first given both Pinefur and Nightwing the gall to reach for power.

"I am here, speak," the dark gray she-cat mewed, yellow eyes boring

into Sunstar's orange ones, but there was no malice, no suspicion, she almost looked pleased to see the other leader.

"I wish to speak to you in privacy," Sunstar mewed in a tone that allowed apology.

Stormstar's eyes narrowed for a moment, looking thoughtful. "Very well," she agreed, gesturing with her tail to head down the shore a bit.

"Wait, I will accompany you," Pinefur stepped forward quickly, *almost too quickly*... Willowwater narrowed her eyes.

"Sunstar? Any objections?" Stormstar asked. But Sunstar was looking at Pinefur, eyes narrowed as they stared each other down. *That settles it, there's something going on between the two... but what is it?!*

"No," Sunstar growled, shaking his head. Stormstar and Pinefur then went with him out of ear-shot of their warriors.

Willowwater pricked her ears and tried to listen, but she couldn't hear anything and she grumbled, frustrated as the wind carried tantalizing bits of murmurs to her. She wriggled more as she saw a flash of dark gray at the edge of her vision and Pinefur started looking around suspiciously.

"Are there ants in your fur or something?" the ThunderClan apprentice, Vinepaw, growled at her.

Willowwater snapped her gaze to the small dark brown tabby with a gray-brown underbelly. "Excuse me?" she mewed incredulously. All the cats were watching them and Stormfang gave a slight hum of warning for her to not lose her temper.

He started it! She argued as she sized up the apprentice with a piercing gaze, using this as the perfect opportunity. "Why are you wriggling so much?" Vinepaw grumbled, shifting his paws as she continued staring at him.

"Why are *you*?" Willowwater countered, she had a whole load of words in her arsenal, and normally she would have been willing to

let it drop since she was, after all, on his territory. But she needed to cause a distraction.

Vinepaw growled and unsheathed his claws, leaping at her. Willowwater sighed, she'd been training with Rainstone lately, and she was sharper than nettle. With a sheathed paw she swiped him away, sending him skidding sideways over the shore.

"Hey! What was that for, jerk?!" Applefang had leapt to her paws, the skinny tortoiseshell was definitely not known for her calm nature.

"He attacked *me*," Willowwater seethed, hilariously outraged at the accusation and how well her little mishap was going. Inevitably, bickering ensued just short of flat-out battle and the leaders were called back to restore order. Willowwater soon found herself leaving ThunderClan territory with a stinging ear and three Clan-mates glaring at her.

Oh well, at least it prevented Pinefur from noticing Rainstone!

Chapter 40: Whatever It Takes

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So... Sunstar and Nightwing are both being played for fools... this complicates things... Rainstone lay musing in the dusty hay-loft in the Horseplace by the RiverClan border. She'd found it warm, deserted, and full of mice, even if she did miss eating fish.

Anyways, it had made the perfect refuge for the past moon. She was still thinking about Sunstar's part in the whole matter, the information she'd learned only a few days after leaving RiverClan. She stared up at the cracked dark brown panels of the roof, while rolling on her back, ignoring the pricking of the hay through her fur.

He's not exactly helping them, but he's agreed to allow them safe passage through his territory on the condition that they don't attack RiverClan. Patchkit being killed was a violation of the agreement so he started moving against them, but how far will he go?

She still wished he'd warn the other leaders, make her job easier. *Who would trust a rogue, after all?* She'd still do it, but it may be less productive. *I also need to go pay Nightwing a visit, let him know what's going with Pinefur's group. It's risky, but I need to break down their trust between each other before they attack.*

Through her travels and spying between the two groups she'd learned the motives of Pinefur and the lies between the two. Both thought they were playing the other for a fool. Nightwing planned on killing Pinefur and taking his black cats as subordinates for himself, since Pinefur wasn't black-furred.

Of course, Pinefur would be the winner of the game since he had more cats at his disposal. Nightwing's cats hardly matched half of Pinefur's. *I'll just bring that game to an end early*. It would save Nightwing's life for the time being, but it would also break off Pinefur's reinforcements.

I estimate that at least two Clans will have to work together to take down Pinefur, even better would be all four Clans, but I'll see what I can do to encourage an alliance between the Clans. She had also been spying on the Clans and had learned a few things that would be useful.

She'd learned things such as Stormstar being known to work with other Clans in the past, as long as the dark gray leader lived, she could almost ensure one Clan willing to make an alliance to take down Pinefur. *The problem with that though, is Pinefur's ThunderClan, they may not believe me until the actual battle and by then it'll be too late.*

That was her most troubling conclusion, since she wasn't sure if she could get Sunstar to fight since she knew he had promised neutrality in return for neutrality, a promise that would be broken once Pinefur had control over the other Clans, no doubt.

The next problem was even if she could get ShadowClan and WindClan to align themselves, Pinefur was in ThunderClan territory, they'd still have to get ThunderClan's support or wait for a last minute counter-attack after lives had already been lost.

Grrr, Pinefur just has to be in ThunderClan... she growled to herself, watching the dim light of morning strengthen and give dusty rays to stripe the worn-out wood. *But it's time to get up and get a move on, I gotta visit Needlepine today.*

She'd arranged to meet with the tom to discuss explaining the situation to the ShadowClan leader, Duststar. Getting up, she crept carefully on the cracking boards. Some were wobbly, while others creaked, but the all held up for her to get to the steps, or ladder, as the twolegs called it.

Lucky for her the steps were wide enough the easily hop down, though it was difficult when one of her front paws had no feeling. *At least it's healed*, she thought, glad that she no longer had to worry about broken bones. It had healed a little odd, so it wouldn't move as easily, but it was for the better, as she didn't have to try to flop it the right way when she walked on it, it just stayed stiff.

Her paws touched the cobblestones that covered the floors between the two rows of stalls the horses stayed in sometimes. Peering around in the misty golden light, she slunk in the damp shadows as she sniffed out a mouse. She quickly found one and dispatched it, trying to ignore the musty smells that reminded her of rotting leaves.

What I wouldn't give for a fish! She tilted her head to the side for a moment, *I will be going by RiverClan territory, and maybe I can catch one on the way back...* The thought was tempting and her quiet thoughts dreamed about an afternoon spent lazing on the stone in the sun as she lapped at crystal clear water that splashed and cooled her paws and she munched on a watery-fish.

Well, I'll just have to see, she thought, purring in her good spirits. She closed her eyes and breathed in with a sigh of contentment as she exited the barn and wind breathed cool and fresh on her face. *I like things like this*, she thought with a shy glance at the ground.

She trotted off up the slope, reaching the crest of the hill that surrounded the side of the lake and the territories. It was a beautiful view to say the least. With the sun rising behind her the shadows stretched away from her, racing over the ground under the miniscule trees and bushes.

The lake was still untouched by the sunlight and was a misty light gray-blue as it waved and lapped and rolled around the shores. The tiny island was a dark spot on the water and all the territories crowding close to the lake in their different features.

She narrowed her eyes in content for a moment, drinking in the sight with her eyes before she headed away from the ridge a little so that she wouldn't be spotted. The ground here was covered with short grass colored green and yellow on the flat plains.

She turned her head and stopped to look to the east, where she had come from unknowingly into this strange land. The earth stretched flat with a few patches of trees and twoleg buildings until it reached the familiar form of the mountains.

For a moment she stared at it longingly, it wasn't the mountains she

knew, or at least, not the area she knew. But she still longed for one moment to breathe in the clear mountain air, to see the endless stone valleys flow around her, the clear water that bubbled and splashed and twisted on its own path.

She closed her eyes and longed to hear the whistle of the wind over the rock and the cry of an eagle, fierce and proud as it soared high over her head. She didn't long for the valley she had grown up in, though she would have loved to lay her eyes on it once more and see her brother's friendly face popping out of the cave and her friend, Whisper, and their kits, Sun and Blizzard.

Her heart ached for one moment as she remembered everyone, especially Night, who had given up everything he loved in exchange for her life. *But I'll... never see them again*, her heart whispered sorrowfully.

She sighed for the third time that day, watching the hazy gray mountains in the far distance, painfully aware of how much land laid between her and the rocks she longed to run her paws over. She looked back over the lake and even though she felt fondness, she didn't love it like she did the mountains.

But... I can't go back to the mountains... should I make my home here? Or should I keep looking for a place that I can love like the mountains? Confusion and anxiety gnawed at her, after she helped the Clans defeat Pinefur and Nightwing, would she stay here? Or would she leave?

Song only said I have to stay for two moons, it's already been one. So I'll have to decide in this moon what I want to do. Her eyes trailed a bird soaring above her, a small hawk, much too small to be a threat to anything but mice really, or kits, but she watched it until it perched on a tree nonetheless.

She continued on her way, circling around RiverClan territory and crossing the rogue area where Nightwing's group lived. She skirted the place warily, she didn't really want to be so close to this territory, but she was supposed to be dead to RiverClan so...

Still, she passed without incident and continued to make her way

along ShadowClan's border past the Thunderpath. She was nearing the spot where she usually met Needlepine when she heard the heavy thumping of paws.

Instinctively she hurled herself up the nearest pine tree, hiding and narrowing her dark blue eyes as three black cats raced swiftly beneath her, sounds muffled by the soft pine layer on the ground. It was Coal, Niko, and Raven of Nightwing's group.

What are they doing? Distrust and anger swelling in her, she dropped lightly on the ground and raced after them, moving in the shadows with almost silent movement. She ran faster as she heard a screech of pain and surprise.

Skidding sideways on her paws, she lashed her tail angrily as she squared her shoulders and faced the three black cats with an intense glare. Two young ShadowClan cats, she assumed they were apprentices, had been confronted by the three black cats.

The she-cat apprentice, a white cat with green eyes, had a long red gash down her side that was spilling blood. *It was supposed to be fatal, she was lucky she dodged in time*. The other apprentice, a ginger tom with blue eyes, was standing in front of her protectively.

"You three are going to turn around and go home," Rainstone growled in a warning voice.

Coal narrowed his eyes, "I know you! You're that Clan cat," he spat.

Raven came to stand by the burly black tom, "She's also, 'Pepper,' though that's not your real name is it..." Raven mewed with narrowed eyes and an unreadable expression while the other two black cats flinched in surprise.

"It's Rainstone, and I'm keeping it that way," she growled, watching Niko and Coal lunge for her simultaneously. She dodged, watching Raven closely; she was the only cat here that would be formidable to her. As she dodged the two cats she put herself in between them and the apprentices.

"Get out of here," she hissed at the two cats under her breath.

"No! I'm going to fight and get revenge for what they did to Snowpaw!" the ginger tom hissed, glowering at the three black cats.

"If you want to help her, than get her out of here, two of us can't fend them off for long," Rainstone growled impatiently.

"Then what are you going to do?" the apprentice snapped, glancing back at the injured apprentice anxiously.

"Keep them occupied for a while then run, they don't like me so they'll come after me," Rainstone growled, tracing a route in her mind. It'd be easy enough to lose them since she had rolled in the dew-laden grass not long before to hide her scent.

"Okay," the apprentice grumbled, helping the slouching apprentice to her paws and running off at a limping pace.

"No!" Niko yowled, leaping for the two apprentices. Rainstone intercepted him with a stinging hit to the muzzle that sent him reeling back with water in his eyes.

Rainstone glared at them with a feral smirk, "You're fighting *me*," she mewed with a growl in her throat.

All three cats glared at her and she anticipated their moves. Coal, of course, tried to use his strength, which she easily dodged, Niko tried to slip around her and trip her up, but she just tripped him in his moves and then shoved him into Coal, causing the two to roll into each other in confusion as they tried to stand up from their tangled stance.

She tensed as Raven leaped lightly over the two toms easily with her long legs, giving her a long look from her amber eyes as they faced each other. "It's a shame I have to kill you," Raven mewed with a note of regret.

"I agree," Rainstone mewed, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes, "But I can't promise you'll succeed," she warned. She knew Raven was a skilled fighter, possibly the most skilled in Nightwing's group.

"You escaped certain demise about a moon ago, I heard about it

from Slate," Raven mewed, Rainstone knew she was talking about the disastrous night when Scampfur had been killed in her slim escape.

Anger flowed through her and she narrowed her eyes dangerously, *this is my chance to avenge him, no, I have to kill them anyways. To save future lives*, she settled herself in hard determination. Raven darted for her, faster than the other two cats combined.

Rainstone used her back paws to turn and hop over the she-cat easily, tilting her front paws to claw Raven's spine as she flipped over, turning to face her unharmed. Raven scowled, but then her eyes lit up and Rainstone could hear the two toms racing for her again.

She closed her eyes for a moment, don't hold back, *don't hold back, just end it.* Glaring at nothing but her own thoughts, she turned and leaped for the two toms as fast as she could, clawing and piercing with her claws. It was simple, it was fast, it was silent. It was death.

Coal fell to the ground instantly and Niko slumped down a moment later, a gurgling gasp in his throat. Rainstone turned, gaze cold, blood stained her paws from the move Pepper had once showed her was for killing prey.

Raven was staring at her wide-eyed and mouth agape. "You killed them... so quickly," she whispered, fear glimmering in her eyes for the first time, along with horror.

"This is what you cats are, I'm simply showing you," Rainstone growled unsympathetically, even though the stench of blood made her sick. She'd never wanted to kill, always hated it and those who did it, now she was no better than them.

I'm sorry Song, but it had to be done. She hardened herself to detesting thoughts and turned to the battle. With Coal and Niko dead, Nightwing would start to lose hop as she picked off his cats one by one. No, she told herself fiercely, she would not hunt them down, only if they were on Clan territory.

She turned to Raven, stepping on the dead bodies cruelly and

allowing their blood to soak her paws. It worked and Raven looked even more terrified. Rainstone leapt and battered at the she-cat who struggled to defend herself against the constantly changing and swift flurry of swipes.

At last, Raven tripped and fell onto her back, Rainstone standing over her with a wide blood-soaked gray paw on her chest, claws unsheathed and pricking into her skin. "I didn't know you were such a monster," Raven breathed, amber eyes terrorized.

The words pricked at Rainstone's heart, but she ignored it. "And I saw just how cruelly those cats murdered a lost kit, and I know she wasn't the first or the last, and why? Because she didn't have the same colored fur as you," Rainstone snarled in disgust, claws pricking deeper into her chest.

Raven's eyes flashed with something, guilt, maybe? Rainstone snarled, leaning in close to Raven's face. "Because you spared my life once, and kept my secret, I'll let you live, for now. But know that if you ever threaten a Clan cat again, I will not hold back," she snarled. Then she let Raven up and chased her off, watching her disappear with a stone glare.

She heard shouts from behind her and guessed ShadowClan cats were approaching, warned by the apprentices. She looked down at the bloody scene and struggled to keep the bile out of her throat as she staggered off. She didn't need to be seen anymore when she was supposed to be dead.

Leaving the scene, she continued on her way to where she'd meet Needlepine, just off the ShadowClan border in a grassy clearing sheltered by a small fruit tree with thick green leaves and small fruits hanging off its stems.

She sat under the tree, smoothing the soft grass and then began to clean her fur, extinguishing all traces of blood and the former fight from her appearance. She heard Needlepine approaching before she saw him, the dense shadows of the trees faded in the sunny clearing, but it was still pricking at her vision the slight movements around her.

"Rainstone, you're okay," Needlepine sighed in relief as he stepped into the sunlight, the dark red and orange molted fur blazed like fire, it was strange to not see him without a covering of black, but she found she loved this look.

"Yes, why wouldn't I be?" she asked casually, not wanting to talk about the former fight. It was something she'd be happy to forget about, she had purposefully avoided looking at her dead victims so that she wouldn't have that memory.

"Flamepaw and Snowpaw told us of four rogues fighting, one defending them and three other attacking. When we got to the scene, two were dead. It was Coal and Niko," Needlepine mewed in a low voice, looking at her with unusually serious green eyes.

Rainstone sighed and looked away, "So what if I helped the two apprentices? Isn't that a good thing?" she questioned, knowing what he was really aiming at.

"Did you kill them?" Needlepine asked, bluntly, standing in front of her slouched form.

Rainstone closed her eyes and cursed under her breath, *just face up to your actions*. "Yes," she mewed harshly, looking up at Needlepine defiantly. "Look, it was either kill or be killed, I chose to keep breathing," she snapped.

"But a true warrior doesn't need to kill to win battles," Needlepine argued in distress.

"I'm not a warrior! And I probably never will be!" Rainstone spat angrily, glaring at the ground. "I'm not the type of cat that can be a warrior, I don't like rules, and I will always break them," she growled, staring at the ground in self-disappointment. No matter what set of rules she was supposed to be following, she just couldn't do it.

I failed in the mountains, and I failed here. She shook her head sadly. "I didn't want to kill them, but I did, and if I find any more on Clan territory, I'll kill them as well. I'll do whatever it takes to win," Rainstone mewed determinedly.

Needlepine sighed and shook his head, "I can't agree with your actions, and I won't support them. However, I will still assist you in warning ShadowClan," Needlepine mewed heavily, she could see the guilt and sadness in his eyes and she felt heavy, knowing she'd disappointed him.

"Oh, you're warning the Clan on your own, I'm supposed to be dead," Rainstone cut in, tilting her head up at a surprised Needlepine.

"But, what?" Needlepine spluttered, looking shocked.

"What's the problem? Say you overheard the plans that Nightwing had cats near both ThunderClan territory and RiverClan territory, and that their prime target is ShadowClan. Oh, and they plan on striking before the next full moon" Rainstone mewed impatiently, tapping her paw.

"That's it? No battle strategies, no real dates? That's hardly helpful," Needlepine scowled, it was an odd look for such a usually happy cat.

"When I have that info, I'll tell you, but until then, keep it at this," Rainstone sighed. She actually did have the exact date, but she didn't want to pour everything out at once. For now, only she and Willowwater knew, not that her friend could warn Sunstar yet, as the leader was still in his neutral agreement.

"Oh, and I want to know if you know of any WindClan cat would be willing to help me," Rainstone added, thinking.

Needlepine was silent for a moment, frowning, than gave her a name. "Frostshine."

"What does she look like? Assuming it is a she," Rainstone wondered again about the weird names Clan-cats had.

"It is a she," Needlepine assured her, "She's small and light looking, of course, all WindClan cats are like that, but she's a pale gray with white paws, tail-tip, underbelly, and face, with really bright blue eyes," Needlepine described her with a small frown.

"Okay, sounds like she'll be pretty easy to find," Rainstone mewed, memorizing the information and for once thanking her good memory. "Any particular reason to ask her?" she just had to know.

"Frostshine used to be a medicine-cat, switched to being a warrior for whatever reasons. I found it odd since she was a good medicine-cat and it wasn't like she had kits or anything, so I used to ask her about it but she never told me. But, as a former medicine-cat, she should have a more open out-look to the good of all the Clans," Needlepine explained.

Rainstone nodded, "Sounds like a good cat to try anyways," she closed her eyes, wondering what she was forgetting. "Oh yeah, see if Duststar would be open to making an alliance with Stormstar, I'll be getting this information to her soon, so don't suggest it today, but we really need ThunderClan's help in order to have this go smoothly," Rainstone sighed.

Needlepine nodded then looked around, "I've been meaning to ask, where you are staying right now," he asked casually but with a glow of curiosity in his eyes.

"None of your concern, however, I often sit at the dock between ShadowClan and RiverClan territory at night for a while, it gets a little lonely though," she hinted shyly, looking at him almost nervously.

Needlepine purred and touched her ear gently, she stiffened then relaxed, it was just like how Night would do it, but more... gently. She found she liked this gentleness more then she liked Night's passion. "Hint noted," Needlepine chuckled, touching her nose gently and looking into her eyes as he did so, almost as if asking permission. She blinked and gave it and nosed him back, feeling him lick her cheek gently in farewell.

She purred and turned away, tail swaying behind her in contentment. *Song said that when I left, I'll take something with me, will it be memories? Lessons? Or maybe someone else...*

Chapter 41: Misty Stars

Chapter 41: Misty Stars

Rainstone left Needlepine in the clearing and headed off toward RiverClan territory, skirting Clan territory. Her limp was hardly visible as she strolled through the sun and shade of the sparsely placed pine trees. Sun-high was approaching quickly and the air was wet and heavy around her, making her feel uncomfortable and she irritably flicked her ears to shoo the flies buzzing around her ears away.

It was never humid in the mountains, but it's humid all the time down here, just another thing to miss about the mountains, she thought with annoyance. She moved forward languidly, in not rush to do the job she was going to do.

They'll kill me on sight, especially after that stunt I just pulled, but if I can get Nightwing alone... He may be curious enough to hear me out and then I can escape when I'm done. That was the best case scenario, though she couldn't help but feeling that her luck would run out eventually, probably at the worst possible time.

Well, I've got to try, between Needlepine and Willowwater, everything I know is known by other cats, so it's no great loss if I do die, she thought dismally, her life seeming so useless was constantly weighing down on her. *At least I mean something to Needlepine*.

She instantly brightened and her step became a bit bouncier as her tail waved behind her, she realized she was looking forward to meeting Needlepine alone that night. His naive personality, his kind eyes, his soft touch, and the way he looked at her with bated breath... as if she was the most special cat in the world.

She blinked her eyes, shoving the vision of twin green eyes full of stars out of her mind and realized she had stopped and that her heart was beating rapidly and painfully in her chest. She groaned, how could she be love-struck? After everything she'd gone through,

she had fallen so far for a cat that she'd be leaving next moon!

Well, after this afternoon, it might not even matter; she thought pessimistically and wondered if there was something wrong that she wasn't even the tiniest bit nervous about facing such a dangerous situation. She'd be walking on death's line, that's for sure.

She halted and stood with a paw elevated in the air at a sudden rustling in the pine needles at the base of a pine tree to her left. Turning her head ever so slowly, she spotted a squirrel digging, its busy brown tail flicking rapidly.

I may hate squirrel, but at least its food and it's probably best not to face Nightwing on an empty stomach. Moving slowly to the ground she stalked forward with her breath held back and her eyes focused on the squirrel while her nose and ears kept watch for any intruders on her proximity.

With a massive leap capable of only cats from the mountains, she landed on the squirrel's tail as it tried to run away. Sighing at its annoying squeal, she killed it and gulped it down, spitting at the hairs that got stuck in her teeth. Using a claw, she scratched at the hairs before moving on with an irritated sigh, hairs still tickling her tongue.

She paused as she came to the Thunderpath just passed Clan territory. On the other side of the strip of smelly black rock, was Nightwing's territory. Yes, she was walking right into danger, and she hardly cared enough to look around to see that the coast was clear.

The Thunderpath's harsh smell left her with a headache as her nose burned and she rubbed her paws on the soft grass on the other side. She looked around, the small sloping hills blocked the view of most of the territory, but there was only a spotty tree or bush in her line of sight, so she knew she was alone, for the moment.

Walking almost aimlessly, she unconsciously noted the way the wind was blowing; it was blowing her scent back towards the Thunderpath where it would be lost. Of course, as she went further in the territory, it'd leave a pretty nice trail for cats to follow her.

She unconsciously took a route along the thickest grass, so tall it went up to her back so that only her head was visible, and she was continuously checking the air for signs of life as her mind wandered listlessly about menial things such as the hot sun or the loud cawing of the crow flying overhead.

She noticed when the wind grew stronger, unconsciously of course, and noted that it would be harder for her scent to be tracked in the gusts that brought faraway scents to her attention. *There, that's Soot, I'm sure*, she pinpointed the young black she-cat and by the scent of prey, guessed she was hunting.

Finally, calling back her mind and attention, she ducked down and moved through the tall grass, hardly more than a few moving stems, hard to see in the wind that lashed them about. She flattened her ears to her head and peered over the grass as the scents grew remarkably stronger. Just ahead, about three fox-lengths, Soot was batting at a butterfly that was flying awkwardly in the windy weather.

Her slack in attention is just another lucky stroke. She thought as, with a deft movement, she leaped on the small cat and pressed Soot's muzzle n the soft dirt, assuring her silence. "Now look, I'm going to allow you to speak, but you are only to say where Nightwing is, if anything else comes out of your mouth, I will kill you," Rainstone threatened, it was a bluff, of course, she had decided she wouldn't kill any cats unless they were directly threatening the Clans.

Soot's wide, scared hazel eyes blinked repeatedly to shows she understood. Rainstone lifted her paw off the young she-cat's head, but kept her firmly pinned beneath her. "H-he was going to train cats in the training hill," Soot stammered.

Rainstone nodded grimly and tightened her claws on Soot until the black cat flinched, "If you are lying, you are dead, as dead as Niko and Coal," she snarled threateningly and Soot whimpered, trembling beneath her.

"So you really did kill them," Soot whimpered.

Rainstone forced an icy glare at the small cat, "They were trying to

kill two young cats your age, they weren't going to show any mercy, so why let them go just so they can do it when I'm not around? And I'll do the same to any enemy cat I find on Clan territory, so you better pray you don't run into me," Rainstone growled warningly, sliding her unsheathed paw toward Soot's throat and pricking the skin to amplify her point.

"Now stay here, I'll not have you interfere. And if it eases your conscience, I'm not going to kill any cat, not if I can help it," Rainstone growled softly, releasing the cat and darting off toward where she knew the training hill was.

She ran swiftly with the wind on her face, her limp all but forgotten as her stiff, unfeeling paw held her up unfailingly. She slowed to a trot, crouched flat against the short grass, peering around cautiously as she neared the crest of the training hill, hiding in a lilac bush for a moment to check the area.

Her timing was perfect, for five cats appeared from the training hill, followed further behind by Nightwing who paused at the top of the hill, letting the other cats go before him and making her job so much easier. She noticed that she only recognized Slate and Felix in the group of cats leaving the training hill; the three others were obviously new members.

How many new members are there? She didn't give herself time to wonder as she watched from the bush as Nightwing walked past no more than two tail-lengths away. "Psst!" she hissed in a low undertone, hoping to distract him without him raising an alarm until the other cats were too far to be called for help.

Nightwing had paused and looked around, a faint confusion on his face and she stayed silent as he listened to the wind with pricked ears. After a few moments of listening, he shrugged and continued. "Psst!" she hissed, slightly louder and causing Nightwing to pause again and look around with slight nervousness.

Estimating the other cats were too far away to hear them above the wind, she stepped out and into the open boldly, looking at the deadly cat that stood in front of her. *Then again, I proved myself to be deadly this morning.*

"Rainstone," Nightwing growled, expression darkening immensely. "How kind of you to bring yourself to me, I don't have to hunt you down," Nightwing snarled, crouching into an attack pounce before hesitating. "Of course, I suppose you have a reason for coming here, and you usually have good reasons, for a murderer," Nightwing sneered.

"You were a murderer first, and that was not murder, it was a fight, they got the short end," Rainstone reminded him.

"Raven said it was as good as murder, but that's beside the point, tell me why you here before I sink my claws into that no-good-mangy-pelt of yours," Nightwing threatened.

"I am here because I recalled that I never got to tell you Pinefur's secret from you," she purred mockingly, curing her tail elegantly.

Nightwing's eyes gleamed with curiosity before he shot her a dirty look. "Why should I believe you?"

"Because," Rainstone snapped, "At the moment, my goals involve saving you from certain demise, unfortunately," Rainstone sighed the last part. "But if you don't want to know, I won't mind watching you and your cats torn apart, it's not my problem," She shrugged nonchalantly, turning away casually.

She heard a hesitated breath from Nightwing before he finally managed to choke out, "Fine, I'll hear you out," he growled unfriendly.

Rainstone looked over her shoulder, "Since you have been so hospitable to me, I will tell you, despite your rudeness," she sniffed, facing him again.

"Get on with it before I change my mind," Nightwing snapped impatiently as she eyed him tiredly, feigning reluctance.

"Alright, alright," she sighed, facing him and changing her demeanor to seriousness. "Pinefur is using you," she mewed firmly.

Nightwing narrowed his eyes, "You're lying, I've seen him and his cats, and he needs me to take over ThunderClan..." Nightwing

trailed off to cackle in laughter, "I'll kill him when *I'm* done using *him*," Nightwing smirked, self-pleased with himself as he waited for her reaction.

She didn't have one; she'd already known his ideas. "I'm afraid you are mistaken, he has more than twice the cats you have, he only ever shows his black furred cats, all his others are colored, he's just using you, I know, I spent four days with them. If it had only been a paw-full of cats, I could have escaped long before it came to a last-second foot-race," Rainstone scoffed.

Nightwing frowned, looking less sure. "You're just lying, you don't want me to help Pinefur because then the Clans don't stand a chance," he growled suspiciously.

Rainstone shrugged, "That's what I was hoping, though if Pinefur demolishes you early enough, it gives almost the same result, you won't win fighting by yourself," she warned.

"Are you suggesting I fight with the Clans?" Nightwing sounded completely shocked.

"Either that or don't fight at all, if you want to continue living that is. Of course, I won't stop you if you want to continue to ally yourself with Pinefur or fight him by yourself, you won't make it more than a moon either way and that's quite alright with me," she added, narrowing her eyes.

"So why warn me?" Nightwing asked.

"I already told you, it is unfortunate that to help the Clans I need to help you stay alive. However, I'm sure it'll work out for the Clans anyways, I can't say the same for you though," she looked him up and down slowly and shrugged.

"If you're lying, I'll skin you alive," Nightwing snarled threateningly.

"I thought you wanted to do that anyways," Rainstone laughed harshly, flattening her ears to her head. "But I must be going, I'm getting hungry," she yawned, "And tired," she added, turning away, ready to flee quickly if need be, but Nigthwing let her go,

contemplating on her words.

"I'll let you go this time, since you didn't attack me, but I will avenge Coal and Niko, I don't forget things like that!" Nightwing shouted from behind her when she reached the bottom of the hill.

She sighed sadly at his ridiculousness and looked back up at him, "I don't forget stuff like that either, so be warned," she called back up, then turned and started running at a swift pace that wouldn't eat up too much of her energy.

Well, that went better than I thought it would, Rainstone thought gratefully. There was still plenty of time for her to relax in the afternoon and possibly catch a few fish for dinner before meeting Needlepine at the half-bridge.

She skirted RiverClan territory, heading up along one of the streams that didn't run into Nightwing's territory, finally finding a grassy bank that was lined with smooth stone edging the river. Perfect, she purred in lazy contentment as she stretched her tired muscles luxuriously in the warm sunlight.

She gave a light moan of pleasure as she laid her aching legs on the heat of the stone; it was just so nice... She laid there, dozing, absently purring as she watched flitting butterflies and hopping frogs along the bank of the stream. Fragrant flowers waved in the wind and the few willows that edged the stream whistled as their long boughs waved gently as the chirping birds.

Such a wonderful afternoon, she thought, dozing on and off in the warm, golden light. She awoke later in the day from the rumbling in her belly and roused herself enough to catch a good-sized fish before realizing it was almost dusk.

I've got to get moving if I want to meet Needlepine on time, she thought, still feeling sleepy from her nap. She didn't want to move, the rocks were still warm and the gentle babble of the stream was the sweetest melody as she took a few laps of water to refresh herself.

Standing up, she gave herself a vigorous shake, but was unable to shake the warmth from her fur and moved forward slowly, thinking

more of the distance to be covered then what was at the end. The evening chirp of crickets and the slightly annoying hum of gnats furthered her regret of leaving the warm rocks.

However, all her regrets melted away when she came up to the half-bridge. Dusk had been replaced by the gray twilight of the changing between night and day and a heavy mist had descended over the lake. But on the half-bridge, staring out over the water was the red and orange tom she had been dreaming about not so long ago.

"Hey! Rainstone!" Needlepine called softly as he looked over his shoulder at her. He seemed more relaxed then earlier and the disappointed gaze he'd held on her that morning was gone, forgotten, as he stared at her in blissful happiness.

"Hey, Needlepine," she purred, stepping up and nuzzling her head under his chin much to his surprise and pleasure.

"I'm glad you could make it," Needlepine mewed softly, lifting one paw over her shoulders to hold her firmly. She leaned into him, feeling his warmth and strength flow into her and sparking her sleepy mind to excitement.

"I am too," Rainstone giggled softly, feeling that bubbly feeling in her again as she looked into his laughing green eyes. She sighed in content as she sank into his fur. He had lain down on the rough boards and her back was curled into his belly, her head tilted toward his so that their breaths tickled the others whiskers.

Her belly and toes were tingling and her breath was stalled every time his breath puffed into her muzzle. *How can I be so in love?* She had always hated mating, but right now, she knew she'd be okay if it was with Needlepine. If it was with him, she wouldn't be scared or nervous or horrified, she'd be... happy.

She looked deep into his eyes, silently asking those misty green stars of eyes. He nodded slightly, looking at her gently and preciously. She sighed in delight as he started licking her face, softly at first and then with more vigor. She returned the affection and her tail waved softly behind her in pure delight.

He licked her fur clean and smooth in quiet grooming as he covered her in his scent and she giggled as his tongue tickled her belly, just adding to the tingling feeling that made her heart race uncontrollably every time it spiked in feeling.

Needlepine had grown more confident and swift as he nuzzled and licked her still with his soft gentleness but also with an edge of possessiveness that translated to assertiveness for Rainstone. She thought back to Night, he had never spent time doing this, he had gone straight to the mating and he had done it mostly for pleasure, not for tying them together for life.

She was so far in dreamy blissfulness, that she hardly felt Needlepine rolling her onto her belly, her back legs curled under her and her front paws stretched out in front of her. Her body recognized the position, but the experience was so different that her mind didn't.

She felt Needlepine standing over her, his breath tickling her ear as he bent his head toward her. "You ready?" he murmured.

She purred back in response, the feeling in her belly growing and making her scratch her front paws across the boards. They mated, Needlepine playing with her ears and biting her scruff gently as she waved her tail and growled softly in satisfaction.

As they went at it longer, Needlepine grew rougher until she was a moss-ball in his paws and she loved every moment of it. She had never known he could be so assertive and possessive, not that she minded that much; she knew it was just a natural response to the act they were doing.

She was wrapped up with him all night, and when they finally finished, Needlepine passed out at her side with his forepaws on either side of her shoulders as he hugged her back into his chest. His back legs held her back end firmly and his teeth were gently nibbling her ear in his sleep.

Rainstone purred softly as she went in and out of sleep. There, on the harsh wooden dock, with the lake's lapping in her ears and the misty night swirling around her, she looked up into the sky and saw

the stars. Instantly reminded of Needlepine's eyes and how they looked like mossy, misty stars stuck in a pelt of red and orange.

She couldn't sleep for her joy, and thought of Needlepine and wondered why she had fallen in love with him. She finally decided it was three things; one, he was completely loyal to her, he would never deceive or leave her; two, his juvenile personality was sweet, innocent, and honest, a type of personality she'd not seen in any tom growing up; and third, the way he made her feel, making her laugh when she should be crying and have fun while she was worrying, not to mention the flame of love she felt that was so different from anything she had ever experienced, even with Scamp.

Sighing in sleepy contentment and perfect bliss, she laid her head down on Needlepine's fore-leg that was wrapped protectively around her, purring lightly as she snuggled into him, well aware of the tiny lives started in her from that night.

Chapter 42: Storms

Chapter 42: Storms

Rainstone floated back to consciousness, sighing in her contentment of quiet sleep. Golden light danced behind her closed eyelids and she felt comfortably warm with her head resting on silkiness. *Wait...*

Jerking her head up and opening her eyes, she was met by a much different scene then she had been waking up to for the past moon. Instead of cracked old boards and dusty air, she was staring out across the mist covered lake with its fresh breeze tickling her whiskers playfully.

Oh yeah, the events of last night rushed through her, leaving her feeling comfortably satisfied. She sighed and snuggled deeper into Needlepine's fur, watching the lake swell and slide in slow moving waves. The peal of gold light came from dawn and she knew she would need to get moving before long to avoid being seen by Dawn Patrols, but for now, she was happy to stay right where she was.

The sky was pale pink with gold crusted clouds and glowing bright yellow where the sun was just starting to peak over the surrounding hills. She felt Needlepine yawn and murmur something incoherent as he awoke, stretching his legs and rolling away from her to wobble unsteadily to his paws.

Rainstone tilted her head to look at him as she remained lying on her side and watched him open his mouth in a yawn, pink tongue lolling out and revealing two rows of sharp teeth as he kept his eyes closed. She laughed as he finally opened his green eyes that were foggy with sleep and he looked around confusedly.

Then intelligence flowed back into them and he turned to look at her laughing expression and he gave her a goofy, lop-sided smirk. "Good morning," Needlepine mewed cheerily, looking brighter than usual.

"Good morning to you too," Rainstone purred, getting to her paws and touching noses with him, letting out a ragged breath of delight as they touched.

"What are you going to do today?" Needlepine asked, letting her lean into him as they stared out over the water together.

"I was thinking of trying to find this 'Frostshine,' WindClan cat and see if she'll be of any help. If I have time I'll scout out around ThunderClan territory to find some cat that might be willing to help, or at least hear me out," Rainstone mewed lazily.

"Ha-hmn," Needlepine made a noise of approval as he rested his chin on the top of her head. "Do you want to meet again tonight?" he asked tilting his head so that his cheek was now on the top of her head.

"Absolutely," Rainstone responded with a purr, closing her eyes and capturing the moment for memory's sake. "Well," she sighed regretfully, "We should probably get moving before we're found here," she said, letting her eyes trail over to RiverClan.

"Alright," Needlepine sighed in disappointment. "I'll be here tonight, just after dusk," he promised, sealing the promise by giving her quick lick on the muzzle.

"I'll be here then," Rainstone responded, forcing her paws to carry her in the opposite directing of Needlepine. But she couldn't help but look over her shoulder to see him looking back at her too. She purred softly and waved her tail before forcing herself to continue forward.

Once away from Needlepine, she became aware of the hunger in her belly and she decided that once she'd finished skirting RiverClan territory she'd catch something. As she neared the horseplace, the sun was already half-way up the sky, but clouds had rolled in and kept the sun off her shoulders.

She stopped in her makeshift home long enough to catch a mouse amongst the dusty straw and scarfed it down ravenously. Then, with strength flowing renewed through her, she headed out of the

barn and headed for WindClan territory, hesitating at their scent marks.

She'd never been into this territory and all she knew about it was that it bordered ThunderClan on the other side along the stream that ran up to the Moonpool. Frowning, she looked across the barren, grassy landscape. There were a few hills on the peaty and grassy ground and scattered boulders and gorse thickets but not much to hide either cat or prey.

These cats must be almost as crazy as ThunderClan to live in a territory like this! There aren't even many rocks for prey to hide in! She narrowed her eyes and looked across the muted brown and pale yellow landscape as she stepped over the border. She didn't know much about WindClan, other than they were the smallest cats of the Clans, so they were probably about her size, and they were sharp-eyed and fast runners.

Almost like rabbits, she thought, laughing in her head as she pictured cats with rabbit tails, noses, and ears. *Oh, what an odd cat I am*, she mused as she looked around again, still light-hearted from her little joke with herself. She stiffened as she heard the patter of steps and she dove for concealment beneath a gorse bush, biting her tongue against the scrape of the vicious thorns.

She peered out cautiously and saw three cats emerge chasing after a rabbit, one turned and blocked its escape route and another expertly raced in for the kill. *It takes two cats to catch one piece of prey?* She was scornful in her mind, but she wondered if it had something to do with the lack of prey.

Rainstone looked among them for the pale gray and white marked she-cat Needlepine had told her to look for. But the only gray cat among the group was a very unusually small pale gray she-cat with long fur and sky-blue eyes, no white markings to be seen.

Rainstone didn't recognize any of the cats, though she thought she'd seen the brown tom with dark gray streaks and green eyes at the one gathering she'd attended; though she couldn't call any names to mind to match the pelt.

Well, it can't always be easy, she told herself as she waited for the cats to leave so that she could continue her search. She wandered around the uniform territory, only spotting a few cats at a distance now and then. She sighed and shook her head; she was getting nowhere fast, it was already quite a while past sun-high.

Think, Rainstone, what did Needlepine tell you about this cat? She closed her eyes and tilted her head, frowning as she thought hard. *He said she was a former medicine-cat... maybe she might be around herbs?*

It was as good a guess as any other, so she started sniffing out herb patches, checking one then another. She was glad she'd learned so much about herbs now; she could easily distinguish from scent which plant fragrance were healing herbs and which weren't.

She paused abruptly as she came to another herb patch, her ear pricked up as she saw a pale gray she-cat sitting, sniffing at a bunch of watermint. *And she has the white paws, tail-tip, underbelly, and face! This has to be Frostshine!*

Collecting her thoughts for a moment, she figured there was no use in waiting, so she strode forward quietly but loud enough to alert the other cat to her presence. Frostshine glanced at her before her gaze came back to her flowers, and after a moment, Frostshine jumped and whirled to face her with wide blue eyes.

"Frostshine?" she questioned, making sure this was the right cat while keeping her gaze innocent and her claws sheathed so as not to alarm the cat further.

"What do you want?" Frostshine asked warily, backing up a few steps.

"I just want to talk, I promise I mean no harm," Rainstone mewed almost pleadingly, staring urgently at the other she-cat.

"You're a rogue," Frostshine flattened her ears as she pointed out the obvious information. "I bet you're the one who keeps straying into WindClan's territory," Frostshine accused.

Rainstone shook her head, "No, I've never been here before, I tend to stay around the ShadowClan and RiverClan border," she half-lied.

"That explains the ShadowClan stench on you," Frostshine wrinkled her nose.

Rainstone twitched her tail in irritable impatience; she didn't smell like ShadowClan, she smelled like Needlepine. *Though I should probably wash that off later*, she reminded herself. "Yes, that would be why," she went along with the comment drily.

"Well, what are you doing here? And if not you, then who has been sneaking on our territory?" Frostshine questioned.

"I've been hanging around the Clans for a few moons now, and I'm aware of a sort of... rebellion involving other rouges in this area against the Clans, along with a few Clan cats," Rainstone explained herself.

"Are you accusing WindClan?" Frostshine spat.

"No, I'm here to warn you, I know that no WindClan cats are involved in the rebellion, but your Clan is one of the first targets, the second, to be exact," Rainstone told the wary cat.

"Why does a rogue care about that?" Frostshine mewed, still hostile, but Rainstone could tell by the way that her eyes flashed that she was memorizing the information.

"Because, some Clan cats helped me, so I'm returning the favor," Rainstone mewed, thinking of RiverClan. "But that's beside the point; here is what I know..."

She told Frostshine all she knew, well, most of it; including the date of the attack. "That's all I know, if you want to find me, I hang around the Horseplace now and again, but you can also contact Willowwater of RiverClan, she's a friend," Rainstone mewed, making a mental note to tell Willowwater that she'd been in conversation with Frostshine.

"Okay... I'll tell my leader, but this had better not be some kind of joke," Frostshine threatened.

"It's not, I promise you that. But... be very careful with that information, don't tell any cat but your leader, if cats start talking, Pinefur's cats might overhear you, considering how close they lay, and they would undoubtedly change all their plans," she warned the WindClan cat.

Frostshine nodded once more, "Would you like me to show you to the border? The other cats would attack you no questions asked."

Rainstone shook her head, "Just point me in the direction of the lake, and I'll find my way," she mewed.

"You're lucky, the lake is just past that hill," Frostshine pointed with her tail at the hill that lay off to the south of her.

"Thanks, take care," Rainstone mewed her goodbye and headed off at a brisk pace, feeling hungry and hoping to be lucky enough to catch a fish in the lake before she tried to find Stormstar and headed back to the opposite side of the lake to meet Needlepine.

Rainstone paused at the edge of the lakeshore. A strong breeze blew out over the lake, whipping her whiskers and fur back in the blowing gale. Slanting her ears to the side in wariness, she edged into the lake, letting the water splash soothingly around her paws.

She glanced up at the sky; the clouds were solid dark gray, looking black or blue in some places as the bruised sky rushed along endlessly with the wind. The wind blew the spray of the lake into her face as she went in deeper, letting the water splash her underbelly as she moved toward the dense forests where ThunderClan lay.

Deciding that the water was pushing her to shore, she chanced a swim in the lake, letting her legs work smoothly through the torrential current as she kept her round gray head above the angry gray waves. She swam steadily and unseen toward the pebbly beach of ThunderClan territory.

It's funny, RiverClan's beaches are sandy, but WindClan's, ShadowClan's, and ThunderClan's aren't. By the time she reached ThunderClan and was passing where the border stream emptied

into the lake her legs were tiring and she was ready to get out.

Looking around carefully and sniffing the air, she detected no cats in the area and snuck onto shore, shaking her drenched pelt and glad that her diet of fish had turned it so waxy that the water just slid off. Rainstone peered into the dense forest; in the gray storm light it looked even more crowded and uninviting.

But I can't just stay here! I have to get to the camp and track down Stormstar! She was about to force herself into the tangle of undergrowth when a shrill cry rang out in the stifling air. Her head whipped around back to the lake, mountain-trained eyes searching for a flicker of unusual movement.

There! A flicker of red brought her attention to a small figure churning desperately in the turbulent waters. Without thinking, Rainstone streaked toward the lake, heading straight for the little kit. Splashing into the shallows that she had so recently left, she realized the kit was caught in an odd current and was being carried out toward the middle of the lake.

But Rainstone wasn't worried about it as she swam strongly and swiftly for the kit, using the current that would soon be her enemy. "Calm down, I'll help you," she soothed to the kit that had to be at least five moons from the she-kit's size.

Of course, all the cats here are much bigger, with the exception of WindClan, than the cats in the mountain, so she may only be four moons. The thoughts flickered across her concentrated mind as she reached for the splashing red she-kit.

The kit lunged for her desperately, her claws scraping Rainstone's outstretched muzzle and she tasted a few drops of blood trickling down into her mouth. "Just calm down," Rainstone repeated in a terse voice as she strained forward to grab the she-kit in her jaws.

She caught the kit's scruff in her mouth and tilted her head back to hold the kit's head above the waterline. "Now just relax and I'll get you to shore," she mumbled around a mouthful of fur.

The kit was trembling as Rainstone turned parallel to the shore,

huffing from the strain of the extra weight. Finally she felt the current loosen its pushing grip and she headed for the shore quickly, knowing she was tiring quickly with an empty belly.

"There, see?" she panted as she dropped the kit in the shallows where the water only just swept over her paws. "Now, what's your name?" Rainstone asked. She was sure this was a ThunderClan kit, but the lake had washed off most of her scent.

"I-I'm Leafkit," the little she-kit stammered, shivering from shock or cold, Rainstone couldn't tell.

"Are you from ThunderClan?" Rainstone asked gently, making her eyes round and soft to calm the kit.

"Yes," Leafkit mewed, sounding slightly steadier.

"Where's your momma?" Rainstone asked, nudging the kit out of the water and onto the pebbly stone beach.

"Back in camp, I wanted to go out exploring but the lake got me," Leafkit's blue eyes widened in fear as she remembered being swept away by the lake.

"I see, how about I take you back?" Rainstone offered, she needed to go there anyways, and this way, if she got caught, she'd have a solid alibi.

"Do you know the way to camp?" Leafkit looked up at her with common kit curiosity.

"I'm sure I can find it fairly easily," Rainstone mewed, *it's always easier to find something a second time, right?* "Now, come on, do you need me to carry you?' she questioned, eyeing the red she-kit, noticing that the kits paws and ears were a paler sandy-red color.

"No, I can walk on my own," the kit mewed strongly, but Rainstone noticed the tremble in her legs and picked her up anyways.

"Who is your momma, Leafkit?" Rainstone asked around the protesting kit's scruff as she entered the hostile looking forest.

"Whispheart," Leafkit answered and Rainstone thought the name sounded familiar.

"But daddy's gone now, and momma's sad," the kit continued.

Rainstone halted in her tracks, feeling a shiver run up her spine as she got a sneaking suspicion at who the father was. "Was your father's name Scampfur?" she asked quietly.

Leafkit withered in her grasp until she could look back up at her, "How did you know?" the kit mewed in an awe-struck tone of voice.

Rainstone hesitated, "I knew your father from before he joined ThunderClan," she mewed finally.

Leafkit gasped, "Are you from the mountains?!" Rainstone gave a slight nod of assertion. "Daddy told me all about the mountains! He said that they were beautiful and the cats he lived with were great! But because of the harsh seasons he had to leave," the kit added.

Never knew he was such a great liar, she thought, but could muster no bitterness as she felt sad and solemn remembering his death and her part in it. "I was good friends with your father before he left, I had actually wanted to go with him, but I left later, when I was bigger," Rainstone mewed.

"Were the mountains really so great?" Leafkit asked with a small sigh.

Rainstone felt a lump in her throat as she remembered the beautiful stones and valleys and waterways, "Yep, they're something else," she mewed in a hoarse whisper as she felt a wave of homesickness wash over her. She fell silent as the kit continued to dream in her mind of how great the mountains were.

Rainstone found her way through the impossible tangle of undergrowth by following the most used routes and eventually the cat scent strengthened and she knew she was near the camp. "Okay, Leafkit, your camp is just ahead," she mewed softly, putting the dozing kit down.

"Are you coming?" the kit asked and Rainstone shook her head.

"I'm a rogue, I don't belong in a Clan cat's home," she mewed.

"Okay, but what's your name? I want to remember you," Leafkit asked, tilting her small head to one side. Rainstone was swept back to a night with a canopy of stars when Scampfur had tilted his head at her just like that. *You have a beautiful daughter, I'm sorry I took that away from you*, she thought sadly.

"You don't need to know my name, now run along," Rainstone shoed the kit away before carefully edging her way to the top of the hollow and ducking beneath a holly bush so that she could watch the camp and wait without being seen.

She saw Leafkit bounding into camp and cats rushed out to meet the kit. Rainstone watched a dainty storm gray she-cat with paler gray paws and ears rush out to meet the kit and lick the red she-kit frantically, her blue-grey eyes shining with relief.

Wispheart... Rainstone contemplated Scampfur's mate. The she-cat looked loving and soft-spoken, the kind of cat Scampfur would have been happy with for a long time. She also noticed the dark gray tom kit by Wispheart's side; he had black paws and grey eyes.

Your son, he has your ears, Scampfur, she thought in a bitter sweetness. She recalled her two tiny kits. She could hardly remember what they looked like, just a fuzzy image drenched in tears. *I guess we're even; I was left behind while my kits moved on, and you've moved on leaving your kits and mate behind.*

With a sigh, she brought her attention back to the camp hollow. She almost growled as she saw Pinefur, striding forward and sternly reprimanding the kit for wandering out and looking around as if he were leader. But Rainstone spotted the cat that title belonged too, remembering her from a few other chance sightings.

The dark gray tabby she-cat held her head with quiet authority that even Pinefur bowed to and her sharp yellow eyes scolded the kit more than any words could. Rainstone watched for a while, the Clan going about their respective tasks.

Finally, she saw her chance when Stormstar headed out of camp

alone. Rainstone moved as quickly and as quietly as she could in the crackling forest. The air was stifling and heavy with the scent of rain that had to fall soon. She saw glimpses of Stormstar between the foliage and raced after the she-cat that moved remarkably fast for an older cat.

She halted as Stormstar paused in a rare clearing surrounded by white aspen trees, their green leaves rustling madly in the wind that tore through the forest. Rainstone crept under a massive fern bush and eyed the leader, pausing as she wondered how to approach her.

"I wonder who was that rogue? And why would a rogue save a strange kit and know where our camp is? Is it one of the rogues we've scented on patrols but can never spot? And how did this cat know how to swim?" Stormstar asked the questions out loud to herself as she stared up at the dark sky.

Rainstone called up a spurt of courage and stepped out, hearing the fern crackle as she brushed through it. "I am that rogue," she spoke quietly, keeping her gaze respectful as she looked at the leader who obviously hadn't known she was there but showed no surprise nonetheless.

"Oh, you are?" Stormstar asked, her yellow eyes warning but not dangerous.

"Yes," Rainstone affirmed, wondering how to continue.

"May I ask what you are still doing on my territory? And why you've approached me?" Stormstar growled, still warningly but not hostile.

"Because I need to talk to you," Rainstone mewed, stepping forward. In a rush of movement Stormstar lunged for her, her paws skillfully aimed so that Rainstone couldn't get away without a scratch down her shoulder.

"I don't talk with trespassing rogues," Stormstar growled, though her eyes showed she was impressed by Rainstone's quick dodge.

So much for being an open-minded leader, okay, so we'll do this the

hard way. And as Rainstone sized up the leader, the storm broke loose and the two cats leapt at each other amid the flashing storm, one wanting to drive the other away, the other intent on saving the other's Clan.

Yes, Rainstone thought, *storms are always like this.*

Chapter 43: Unneeded

Chapter 43: Unneeded

Rainstone skidded across the leaf-strewn floor on her side, using her momentum; she bounced to her paws and with her paws pushed deep into the ground, raced back for Stormstar. She ducked, jumped, and slashed, hitting the older leader hard on the head.

She hissed in pain as Stormstar didn't even flinch and counterattacked with a hard hit to her jaw. Rainstone took a few steps back and faced Stormstar with a fierce glare, she had never faced such a difficult opponent, not even Nightwing could really compare to Stormstar's tireless focus and endless strength.

She was bleeding from several scratches, none too deep to be dangerous, and she felt as battered and bruised as a kit-worn moss-ball. In sort, she was exhausted and nearing the end of her fighting strength. But she wasn't the only one.

Stormstar was panting heavily and her yellow eyes became unfocused as she gasped in breath. Around them, the storm raged with wind that whipped wet leaves into their faces and lashed their pelts with rain. The thunder growled with them and the lighting flashed with their claws; but they were in their own world, unaware of anything outside the fight.

Rainstone glared at the opposing leader with fierce determination, all her efforts to explain herself had been ignored by Stormstar, so she only had the choice to defeat the leader and force her to listen to her, she *needed* ThunderClan on her side. With that in mind, she charged again.

But her paws slipped as she tried to twist around Stormstar and jump on her back. Stormstar reared over her and aimed her much larger paws to swat Rainstone away. Rainstone struck like a snake and bit down hard on Stormstar's paw.

She bit down hard, feeling her fangs grate against the delicate bones in the paws. Stormstar let out a howl of pain that was drowned out by thunder. But Rainstone lacked the energy to crush the bones and so tried her best to take advantage of Stormstar's distracted pain.

She released the paw which Stormstar drew back sharply, and while Stormstar was on three legs, Rainstone dove under her belly, slipping easily on the wet grass and knocking out her back legs, sending Stormstar to the ground.

Rainstone jumped on her and tried to wrestle her into a pin, but Stormstar was larger and thus stronger, soon Rainstone was just tearing desperately and jerking at every second to avoid punishment by Stormstar's claws.

Then she felt her back paw stick against a rock and she used the stability to force Stormstar onto her back. She hooked her claws into Stormstar's shoulders, so that any movement made by the leader caused agony.

She looked down with wide, almost wild black eyes at the leader that had driven her into a sense of desperateness. But she didn't hate it, she felt more alive than she had for a long time, fear and adrenaline coursing through her to add strength to her exhausted limbs.

Stormstar stared up at her, yellow eyes blank with shock and mouth trembling in pain. "I... Win," Rainstone gasped out as her chest heaved to draw in air.

"What are you going to do now?" Stormstar asked in a whisper, still looking stunned at her defeat.

"I'm going to warn you about something that will save your pathetic life and your Clan, though after this, I doubt you deserve it," Rainstone snarled angrily, realizing as she slowly became aware of her surroundings, that it must already be almost dusk, she was going to be late for Needlepine!

"I won't believe it!" Stormstar spat.

"Then you and all your Clan is going to be destroyed, and it will be on your head!' Rainstone hissed furiously, becoming more and more enraged by this cat's insolence to turn away help when it was offered

"I don't care!" Stormstar's words stopped her cold and made her numb.

"What do you mean, 'you don't care?!'" Rainstone snarled softly, lowering her head so that she was nose-to-nose with the defeated leader.

"I'm growing old, I won't live much longer, and I was just defeated by a worthless rogue! My Clan will survive if they want it bad enough, no matter what I do," Stormstar cried.

"You old fool!" Rainstone slapped her paw across Stormstar's muzzle. "You are their leader! It's your responsibility! Yes, ThunderClan will survive if they want it bad enough, but how many lives will be lost? How many members will families lose to survive, just because you don't care enough?!" Rainstone was snarling spitefully now, her claws clenching tighter as she recalled her family back in the mountains, making Night lose her just because her father couldn't care enough.

Stormstar fell silent and stared up at her resentfully. Rainstone sighed, "I'll tell you what's going on anyways..." she recounted all she knew of Pinefur's and Nightwing's plans. She was glad that at least Stormstar seemed to listen with half-believing eyes.

"Pinefur! That snake-bellied-!" Stormstar hissed outraged. "If he thinks he's going to take me down so easily, I'll show him he's dead wrong," Stormstar spat was her fighting spirit.

Rainstone had relaxed her grip on the cat but Stormstar hadn't once tried to throw her off. "They plan on attacking the night before the full moon," she mewed, finishing with the date of the attack.

Stormstar frowned, "That's only a little over half a moon, and do we attack before then, or wait for them to reveal themselves?" Stormstar mused.

Rainstone shrugged and jumped off Stormstar. "I'm afraid this is where my help comes to an end, I don't know anything about battle strategies, I'm just good at spying and running," she gave a wry look. "But I've also alerted ShadowClan and WindClan to this threat, they should be willing to help you as you will need some help to defeat them," Rainstone warned and Stormstar looked at her resentfully, but nodded grudgingly.

"I'm not too proud to admit that I can't take on a force twice of that of mine, I'll talk with Splashstar and Duststar... But what about Sunstar?" Stormstar asked curiously.

Rainstone gave her an annoyed look, "Sunstar is being played for a fool, and I'll let him keep doing that for now, but I guarantee he won't help you if you ask," Rainstone felt the familiar twinge of irritableness that Sunstar was trusting a traitorous Clan cat's word.

"However, the force that will be attacking from that side of the lake, will probably hit ShadowClan and RiverClan before they get to you, so don" worry about them as of yet," Rainstone mewed, turning her head away so that it was shielded from the lashing rain.

Stormstar nodded and looked at her, "You didn't tell me your name, or why you're doing this."

Rainstone stiffened, the less that was said about her the better. "You don't need to know my name, for I doubt we'll ever see each other again. As for why I'm doing this... I owe the Clans, I'd be dead if not for them right now, so helping them survive is my little thank you," Rainstone shrugged and turned away, limping slightly because of her wounds.

"Well, I thank StarClan that some Clan cat helped you out, who was it?" Stormstar asked, "I'd like to thank them if ThunderClan survives."

Rainstone looked over her shoulder, considering, "Flickertail, Sweetberry, and Willowwater of RiverClan, and add in Sunstar if you'd like," Then Rainstone leapt into the stormy darkness and left the leader far behind her.

Rainstone found her way to the lake and looked around in the dark gray light over the stormy blue waters. She decided to cross through ShadowClan territory to reach the Half-bridge, as it was a shorter route, even though it was harder to see and the waves lapped most hungrily along the slick bank.

The wind blew her tail around her legs and the rain continued to drench her pelt, though she was glad that it washed away the blood that had stained her gray fur. She didn't want to worry Needlepine when they had only just gotten together.

The clouds didn't lighten and it was almost pitch black when she reached the half-bridge. She looked around and didn't see Needlepine. Shaking with cold as the rain turned chilly with nightfall, she crept underneath the half-bridge to have some shelter on the muddy ground.

She curled down, feeling feverish as her temperature rose while her skin stayed unhealthily cold. Her wounds burned and stung and her belly grumbled in complaint of not being fed since that morning. But exhaustion weighed down on her like a heavy dark blanket.

She dreamed that night, but it wasn't of Song or anything important, it was broken memories and feelings of when she'd been in the mountains. For some reason, she kept seeing her mother, the elegant, dainty silver fur, the curled tail, the soft gray eyes full of hope and despair, the fuzzy white stripe on her muzzle, and her softly rounded face.

Hot tears seeped through Rainstone's sleeping eyes as homesickness washed over her making her feel more miserable than ever before. She couldn't keep from sobbing for all she had lost, how could she miss something she'd hated so much? She'd hated every day in the mountains, how she was scorned for her birth, how she was expected to be nothing more than a means to an end, necessary to no one.

She'd been so unneeded, so expendable, unvalued. But her life didn't feel valueless; she'd saved cat's lives in the mountains and down here by the lake. So why...? Why did she still not have a home? Have a family? Why was she all alone?

And with those thoughts she cried herself to sleep in her solitude, knowing Needlepine wasn't coming for her.

.....

Rainstone awoke groggily, with a feeling in her belly that could only mean one thing. She was sick; her dry tongue, her hot temperature, her senseless shivering, her buzzing head that pounded harder and harder. The swirl of colors before her eyes that refused to take shape, she'd never been so sick, but she had been sick once and it had been kind of like this.

But she wasn't on the muddy ground below the dock; she was in an old fox cave, a very old fox cave that only had the faintest lingering scent of the red beasts. She lay in a spacious mossy nest and her wounds were bound with cobwebs, though she noted no herbs had been used to stop the infection she could feel starting.

Who? Then she spotted him, orange and red fur and bright green eyes sleeping by the low rock entrance, snoring softly as the golden light filtered in around him. "Needlepine?" she questioned in a rough whisper.

"You're awake!" Needlepine cried in relief, head shooting up and scrambling over to her immediately.

Rainstone's head felt dizzy and she was in desperate need of some water and a fresh breeze on her face. "Water," she croaked out, laying her head back down and closing her eyes before she could faint in front of Needlepine.

"Okay, okay, just stay here," Needlepine mewed hurriedly, and the last sound she heard was his retreating paw-steps.

When she awoke, her muzzle was wet and she could feel that her fever had gone down enough that she could open her eyes and the world didn't swirl in front of her eyes. She lapped eagerly at the soaked moss-ball in front of her muzzle and she felt the sweet watery relief in her throat.

She sighed when she had drunk her fill and she could feel a light

breeze flowing into the cave. She also noticed the purple light that told her it was twilight and she wondered how long she'd been in here. "Needlepine?" she called lightly, she didn't see him in the den and she was sure he had been there before, though her head hurt so much she couldn't really remember.

"Rainstone?" a voice returned her call and she saw Needlepine's green eyes staring at her from outside the den.

"Yeah," she mewed with a reassuring look at his anxious expression. "I'm okay," she mewed, struggling to sit up but deciding it better to stay lying down when her head flipped at the movement.

"Do you need something? Anything?" Needlepine mewed desperately, hovering over her and nosing her.

Rainstone waved him away with a paw. "Do you have feverfew? And tansy?" she huffed out, remembering that Flickertail said they used tansy down here for sickness.

"Yes! I didn't know how to use them, but I know what they look like!" Needlepine mewed eagerly.

"Well, I know how to use them, so please get them," Rainstone sighed tiredly, settling her head back down as she felt her little bit of strength ebbing. She wondered if she should ask for something to eat, but the nauseous churning in her belly told her that would be a bad idea.

She rested, but didn't fall asleep as she lay; only thinking about how the cool night breeze felt so nice on her feverish skin. The quiet call of an owl calmed her nerves but she remained aware of the heavy pounding of her heart.

"Rainstone? I'm back," Needlepine's voice was muffled and she smelled the familiar scent of feverfew and the sharp tang that must be tansy.

Rainstone jerked open her eyes and jumped at the sudden break of her peace. "Oh, thanks," she mumbled, trying to calm her racing heart that had jumped foolishly at Needlepine's voice.

She grabbed the herbs from Needlepine and divided them into four doses that would be good for the next day and a half. "That hits the spot," she sighed as she gulped down the first dose with relief, imagining she could already feel the herbs working their relief on her sick-ridden body.

"How did you get so sick anyways?" Needlepine laid down near her, but she shooed him to the side because he was blocking the breeze.

'Uh..." Rainstone closed her eyes and struggled to remember what happened before she passed out. "Oh yeah! I slept in the wet mud and rain waiting for you! Where were you?" she asked irritably, staring at him in an accusing fashion.

Needlepine flinched, "Because of the storm I couldn't get out of camp, every time I tried I was sent back to the den, so I just gave up," he mewed apologetically and Rainstone snorted. Although she was relieved that at least he had tried, her feelings of loneliness still edged at her mind as her greatest fear.

"Well, I think I must have also pushed myself too hard earlier when I fought Stormstar," Rainstone admitted, nodding weakly at her wounds.

"You fought Stormstar?!" Needlepine exclaimed.

"That's what I said," Rainstone sighed, annoyed that he repeated what she said.

"But, Stormstar... is Stormstar!" Needlepine stammered as he searched for words.

"Yes, she was the toughest opponent I've ever had, I only barely won, even with all my recent training," Rainstone mused tiredly, closing her eyes again.

"Well, you just rest for now," Needlepine mewed softly, nudging her caringly.

"Wait..." Rainstone mewed quietly as she struggled to keep out of the sleepy blackness that yawned like a pit in her mind. "How long... have you been caring for me?" she asked, she had assumed

that this was the first day.

"Three days now, I haven't been back to camp since I found you under the dock," Needlepine mewed quietly.

The shock of the news was the last thing Rainstone knew before giving in to sleep. She may be unneeded, but she wasn't unloved.

Chapter 44: Quiet

Chapter 44: Quiet

Rainstone breathed in deeply as warm scent of flowers and the fresh air drifted around her. She exhaled and sighed, closing her eyes as she soaked in the pool of sunshine. Opening her eyes again from where she sat in the green grassed clearing, she could see the wave of trees and the shimmer of a small stream not too far away.

It had been four days since she'd first woken up from her sick fever, and even though she still got dizzy when she pushed herself too hard, she was recovering nicely. Needlepine had gone back to his Clan two days ago and only been able to come over once, his Clan suspicious and worried about his sudden disappearance.

"It's in the air, even if the cats don't all know what's going on, you can just sense... the quietness of everything is concealing something."

The words she'd spoken to Needlepine before he left last time echoed in her mind. It was true, the peacefulness just felt superficial. It made Rainstone uneasy; it was too much like the mountains, where the beautiful weather and nature seemed to be trying to hide the atrocities shamelessly committed by the cats in the mountains.

It kept her constantly looking over her shoulder, something she did just now. It unnerved her that there was nothing there and she was wired on edge, she couldn't shake this sense of fear that rang through her at every sudden sound or movement. She stiffened as a sudden burst of wind swept around her, waving her tail to the side.

She turned her head, making sure nothing was approaching while her ears and nose were blocked by the wind. When it calmed, the sun continued beating down and the gurgle of the stream continued happily. She looked out over the large, grassy meadow; it was surrounded by pine trees, but they were only like a dark shadow on the edge of the vision since the meadow was so big.

One of the line of pine trees was where ShadowClan territory laid, making it easy for Needlepine to get to her while keeping her out of Nightwing's territory. Needlepine had told her that he had spotted her underneath the dock on patrol and had taken her here, a place where he used to play with his sister when they were apprentices.

Rainstone liked it here, it was peaceful, she never saw or even smelled danger and there was plenty of prey hiding in the meadow bushes and flower beds. But even with the quiet, she wasn't as ease, not even when Needlepine was there could she fully shake the sense of danger.

That's it, I'm leaving this lake the day after the full moon, that ends my deal with Song, and by then Nightwing and Pinefur should be defeated and I'm free to go. She'd decided that for a while now, but now she felt the urge to leave even more strongly than before.

She looked up at the cloud-patched sky, trying to calm herself down, but even as she struggled to enjoy the quiet, she wanted nothing more than to get up and move. *There's just one thing stopping me, and he has two green eyes.*

She whined to herself quietly, lying down on her belly and covering her face in her paws. After all she'd gone through; the thing preventing her from continuing now was a tom. *But... he's not like those I once knew, he's kinder and gentler then even Pepper.*

But she knew she couldn't leave without him. *So, what? If he doesn't want to leave, do I end up staying here forever? Maybe when I have his kits, I won't need him so much, and then I could leave my kits here to become warriors...* The thought wasn't all bad, but thinking about parting with her kits again tore at her heart and she doubted she was strong enough to do it.

I'm too broken, I can't break anymore or there won't be anything left! Rainstone felt tears in her eyes, she couldn't stay here, but she couldn't leave, what was she to do?! The agony of the paradox forced her to sleep and when she woke the long shadows and indigo sky told her it was just after dusk.

Getting to her paws, she went over to the stream and lapped up a

few mouthfuls of water before paying attention to the rumble in her belly. She looked at the stream longingly, but knew it was too shallow to have any fish in it.

Instead, she turned and wandered around the meadow, finally finding a young quail to satisfy herself upon. When she returned to the den that was dug under where an odd boulder stretched over a small dip in the ground. She squeezed into the den and found her way in the gloom to her freshly cleaned nest.

She sighed, waiting up to see if Needlepine would show up. But she fell asleep, her aching wounds and tired head happy to have the rest.

...

"Rainstone?" Needlepine's quiet voice was what woke her up and she purred as she touched his nose in greeting with his head bent over hers. Needlepine purred back and laid down in the nest next to her, his belly pressed against hers as they laid on their sides facing each other.

"How are you?" Rainstone mumbled sleepily.

"Tired, They've been keeping me busy after being away for so long, I don't know what they think, but Duststar seems to understand... I think he must have spotted me once with you. But he seems to be willing to let it rest for now until the whole problem at paw is taken care of," Needlepine mewed.

Rainstone nodded, nervous about the thought that some cat had spotted them together. When they were together, that was for the two of them and no cat else. "Do you know if Stormstar has contacted Duststar?" she asked.

"Actually," Needlepine's ears pricked, "She visited yesterday and it seems she's made a sort of alliance between ShadowClan, ThunderClan, and WindClan to counterattack Pinefur on the night before the full moon. I don't know what the plan is exactly yet, only Duststar and Wolfseed-"

"Your deputy?" Rainstone interrupted and Needlepine nodded.

"Only those two know in the Clan so far," Needlepine mewed.

"Good, if word gets out to Pinefur there will be big problems," Rainstone sighed.

Needlepine nodded, "That's why I'm worried about ThunderClan; they can't really prepare anything aside from gathering extra herbs without Pinefur knowing, so they'll be the least prepared. I don't think Stormstar has even told any cat in ThunderClan besides her medicine-cat, it's going to be a totally last-minute attack for ThunderClan," Needlepine mewed.

Rainstone shrugged, "There's no helping it, but, Needlepine, I need to talk to you," she looked at him seriously.

"Yes?" Needlepine eyes sparkled as he twitched his whiskers.

"I'm leaving the lake the day after the night of the full moon," she mewed in finality. Even if he didn't come, she'd get over it eventually, be able to look back fondly on a few memories. But she couldn't live like this, and she couldn't join a Clan, no, she had to keep searching for a place to call home.

"What?!" Needlepine cried, jumping to his paws and staring at her in a state of shock that turned to black despair. "How...? Could you leave me?" he cried, tears swimming in his green eyes that were brighter than usual.

Rainstone's heart tore and she felt her lips quiver as tears rose in her own eyes and her chest weighted down in sadness. "I'm sorry! But I can't live like this! I can't.... I need a home! This isn't that and I know it won't be here, I need to go find it!" Rainstone cried, feeling as confused and frustrated as when she had to leave the mountains.

She'd been basically forced to go back then, but it had felt like a choice. And now, as she was choosing to leave, it felt like she was being forced to go. In a way, something was forcing her to leave, to keep moving, and to keep searching.

"But... isn't your home with... me?" Needlepine choked out, staring at her in sad confusion.

"Yes... no... I don't know! I don't want to leave either, but I have to! I can't stay here, I just can't," Rainstone buried her face in her paws in confusion.

Her shoulders quivered as she kept down the sobs and she couldn't help but wonder when she'd gotten so sentimental. *Needlepine influenced me, I'm sure of it... so how could I leave him?* She wished for him to say those few words, those words that would tell her that he would come with her, but they didn't come.

"Rainstone, I have to go back to my camp... but I'll be back," Needlepine mewed finally, sounding as if he was trying to turn things back to normal, but it just made Rainstone feel even more miserable. Her sobs faded with Needlepine's paw-steps and she was left alone in the quiet meadow.

...

Rainstone walked over the Thunderpath, breathing in the comforting scent of RiverClan. It had been her home for a while, it had only been temporary, but she still felt as if this place would always have a comforting scent for her.

After she'd pulled herself together when Needlepine left, she'd seen that it was before dawn and had decided that she needed to talk to Willowwater, as she hadn't seen her friend since before she'd gone to WindClan and ThunderClan. She needed to be updated.

Rainstone kept alert as she made her way through the territory, advoiding main trails and hunting spots. "Hey! What's this way?" a sudden shout made her jump and she darted under a large honeysuckle plant, hidden both from vision and scent by the large, fragrant plant.

She peeked out carefully and spotted Sweetberry with Flashkit. *No... she must be Flashpaw... and Sweetberry is her mentor*. For a moment she wished she'd never left RiverClan, but she knew it was far better this way without any duties to tie her to the Clan.

She waited for them to pass, glad that Sweetberry had a real apprentice this time, *she deserved it, she taught me so well*. She thought it was odd that she felt so much gratitude, she'd certainly never felt that way while in the Clan, but now she was overflowing with thanks.

But, hopefully, I'll be able to repay that debt soon enough by ensuring their survival. Rainstone then continued on, climbing up the willow tree she had taken refugee under so long ago after Patchkit's death. It feels like a lifetime ago, but it was less than two moons ago.

She stretched out among the shady tree under the blazing sun, waiting and resting as she watched for Willowwater. This was her spot to meet the RiverClan she-cat, and Willowwater checked it between patrols to see if she was waiting.

There she is, Rainstone roused herself and stretched, waving her tail against the willow leaves to alert Willowwater to her presence. "Rainstone!" Willowwater cried with relief and happiness as she leapt down from the tree.

"It's only been a few days," Rainstone mewed in annoyance as Willowwater greeted her ecstatically.

"It's been a quarter moon!" Willowwater argued.

"Whatever, that's only a little but more than a few days," Rainstone huffed, trying to pull strength to her tired limbs so as not to appear weak to her friend and worry her.

"You're injured!" Willowwater pointed out huffily, as if trying to prove she'd been right to worry.

"Nothing serious, I just was taking it easy since my work is now done," Rainstone shrugged her away and covered her worst wounds from Willowwater's prying eyes.

"Frostshine came to see me a few days ago, she said to tell you that Splashstar of WindClan had made an alliance with ThunderClan to defeat Pinefur, care to explain?" Willowwater asked, falling back to

her aloof attitude as they climbed into the privacy of the willow tree.

"It's pretty self-explanatory," Rainstone retorted, "I finished telling all the Clans about Pinefur and Nightwing," she concluded.

"What about Sunstar?" Willowwater challenged.

Rainsotne glanced at her but didn't respond, staring out into the distance as she listened to Willowwater rant angrily. "You're telling every Clan but RiverClan! That puts us at risk, why not tell Sunstar? Or let me tell him?" Willowwater challenged.

"He's in a neutrality agreement right now, Sunstar wouldn't do anything," Rainstone used it as an excuse.

"It couldn't hurt to let him know about the whole situation! You said yourself that Pinefur is lying to him, what you know can prove that Pinefur is lying to him and he can break off the agreement!" Willowwater growled.

"Then what?" Rainstone shot back, whipping her gaze to her friend, "You think RiverClan can defend itself all alone if Pinefur would to decide to enact revenge on Sunstar immediately?" Rainstone questioned.

"You don't know that for sure! Stop lying! What's your real reason?" Willowwater hissed, claws clenching the branch as her tail whipped around uncontrollably.

Rainstone huffed and looked away, feeling uncomfortable and slightly guilty. *I've spent way too much time with her; she knows when I'm lying.* "Fine," she snapped, lowering her eyes. "I want Sunstar to learn his lesson, after Pinefur and Nightwing have been defeated, I'll leave it to the other leaders to take him down a notch."

"You're setting RiverClan up to be a model of humiliation?" Willowwater hissed, outraged.

"Yes, but Sunstar will learn if lesson and be a better leader for it," Rainstone admitted, hating to hear the furious sadness in Willowwater's voice.

"How could you do that? To me? To my Clan? To *your* Clan?! Make us the scorn of the other Clans for being ignorant of something they couldn't have known without you!" Willowwater cried angrily.

"Sunstar's problem is not ignorance; it's letting a problem grow until it's too big to be taken care of alone. If he had fought Nightwing right when he had made the agreement, he would have won, and RiverClan would be safe with the problem on the other side of the lake!" Rainstone spat.

Willowwater stared at her with wide eyes. "But what about us? The rest of the Clan never knew about it, we have the right to know now!" Willowwater argued.

"If you're so convinced, then why ask my permission? You have the knowledge and the position to tell your Clan without me," Rainstone shot at her friend bitterly.

Willowwater stared at her silently, claws clenching the branch tighter. "Because, I respect you, you're strong, smart, and you care, you are my best friend..." Willowwater trailed off, looking miserable and lost for words.

Friend...? The word echoed in Rainstone's heart and she felt joy flow through her under her icy exterior. *I never had a real friend... not even Whisper or Dusty meant as much to me as Willowwater does*. "Then... I do give you permission to tell Sunstar, tell him all you know, if RiverClan was prepared to fight Nightwing, then the other three Clan could just concentrate on Pinefur's forces," Rainstone nodded.

"Thank you-"

"But I don't care," Rainstone cut her off, going back to her cool tone of voice.

"What?" Willowwater looked at her, confused.

"You said that I care, I don't," Rainstone turned her face away. A moon or two ago, those words would have been true, but she knew that she did care now, and she had to lie because in a way it was

true. I don't care long enough to stay here.

"Whatever you say," Willowwater purred laughingly.

Darn it, I really can't lie to her anymore, she doesn't believe it anymore. But she found herself feeling amused instead of annoyed.

"Well, I better get back to camp," Willowwater sighed.

"Wait," Rainstone looked at her, trying to find the words for the two announcements she had.

"Yes?" Willowwater looked at her curiously from behind those forest green eyes of hers.

"We... err, I mean, I'm expecting kits," she mewed, staring at her friend's blank look anxiously.

"Wow! That's great!" Willowwater shocked look cleared to joy and happiness. "I can't wait to see them! And who is... oh! I bet its Needlepine! He's the father, right?" Willowwater chattered excitedly.

"Yes... Needlepine is the father, but I don't know if you'll see them," Rainstone started awkwardly, wondering again if she was being selfish.

"What do you mean?" Willowwater asked.

"I... I'm going to leave the lake after the next full moon; I don't want to stay here anymore... I can't stay here. I need to find a home," Rainstone mewed anxiously, looking nervously at Willowwater's bowed head.

But when Willowwater lifted her head up, her green eyes showed her understanding, with a hint of sadness behind the outlook. "I kind of always knew you wouldn't stay forever, but will Needlepine be going with you?" Willowwater asked in a quiet voice.

"I don't know, I asked him this morning, but he didn't say anything to me about it afterwards..." Rainstone trailed off, unwilling to voice her fears that she'd be leaving alone.

"Don't worry," Willowwater nudged her comfortingly. "He wouldn't be able to live without you, I've seen how he looks at you, he'd miss you before long and run after you," Willowwater laughed a little, putting on a cheery face, but Rainstone could see it covered her sadness. She knew because she'd done it so often back in the mountains.

"Thanks, Willowwater. Who knows, if I find a home close enough, maybe I'll come visit on occasion!" Rainstone forced optimism for her friend and from how Willowwater's eyes lit up, it worked.

"That would be great! I hope that's what happens," Willowwater sighed and they climbed down from the willow tree. Then Willowwater turned to her suddenly as they said their farewells.

"Just promise me one thing," Willowwater mewed, frowning slightly and serious-eyed.

"Yes?" Rainstone questioned, slightly wary.

"Make sure you come say goodbye before you leave, no running off into the sunset like some happy couple. Make sure you come give me a final goodbye," Willowwater mewed firmly.

Rainstone looked at her with a slight smile, "I can make that promise," she nodded.

"Thank you, Rainstone, goodbye for now," Willowwater nodded and turned back toward camp.

"Goodbye for now, friend," Rainstone mewed softly, then she turned and headed back toward the quiet, waiting meadow.

Chapter 45: Too Early

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Rainstone looked up at the gray-torn sky alone in the abandoned meadow that she had been staying in for half a moon. *Tonight... it all goes down*, she thought. Tomorrow night it would be the full moon, so tonight Pinefur and Nightwing would attack the Clans and they'd either win or be defeated.

I wonder what the Clans have in mind... She'd left the Clans alone for the most part recently, not stepping paw on Clan territory since she'd last seen Willowwater. She was willing to allow herself to trust and be surprised by the Clans.

She hadn't really seen Needlepine since she'd told him she was leaving, he'd only come over a few times to check up on her and had left after a few words. She rubbed her slightly rounded belly with a paw, trying to feel the kits.

She didn't feel much, and guessed there were only two, like last time, or one. But she'd been so busy last time; she hadn't really been able to think about how it felt. It was an odd feeling, having something moving around her belly on its own, but it filled her with shivers of delight and motherly warmth.

If I told Needlepine I was expecting his kits, would that convince him to come with me? But she didn't want him to come with her if he wouldn't be happy, he had to make this decision on his own. She'd be leaving the day after tomorrow, it was so close, and there was so little time.

But... he never told me a definite, 'no,' so, maybe he hasn't decided? She mused on that for a while, shivering against the wind that actually felt chilly. *The warm season will be ending soon, I wonder if they get snow down here?*

But she wasn't scared or even nervous about venturing into the

unknown with unborn kits. She knew she would be fine, she'd find the place where she could live the rest of her life in content happiness, though she wondered if she would ever forget about the mountains, and all the cats she left back there.

I wonder...? No! I can't go back, they'd kill me on sight, nothing would change if I'm dead, I just have to wait and hope for another cat to come along and pick up my legacy where I left off. She looked up at the sky again, the sun was half-way down the sky, and it'd be show-time before long.

She ate and drank and slept, making herself as strong as she could for the night ahead. She wanted to stay out of the fighting as much as she could, but she needed to be prepared. She had already decided what she'd do a few days ago. First, she'd go see how the Shadow-Thunder- Wind alliance went and get the final answer from Needlepine if he was coming or staying.

After that, assuming the Clans won, she'd head over to RiverClan and see what was going on with Nightwing. And again, assuming the Clan won, she'd say goodbye to Willowwater before spending her last day on the edge of the Clans, getting ready to leave.

She could feel the butterflies in her stomach again and she willed them to quiet down as she got up and headed out of the meadow. The dark pines seemed darker than usual under the restless sky and the muffled quiet of the forest pressed denser than before.

Rainstone slunk through the trees, heading along the path she knew would take her to the lake. She wondered why she hadn't seen, or even seen any sign of neither cat nor prey. She made it to the lake without incident, and by then, it was just past dusk.

Okay... so this is it. She took a deep breath and headed toward where ThunderClan territory. *Figures, my least favorite territory is where it's going down*. She glanced at the gray lake; it was unusually still just like the wind, as if everything was building up right on top of them.

A storm is the last thing they need; it'll give the advantage to Pinefur's cats that have been living underground in the dark... though Needlepine

says ShadowClan is a nighttime Clan. Rainstone continued along the edge of the lake until she entered ThunderClan territory.

She was starting to get nervous from the lack of anything as the sky got darker and darker as the sun went down. In the dark gray light, she wandered through ThunderClan territory, lightly aiming for their camp where she'd try to get the information if she could.

Finally! She thought as she exhaled a sigh of relief, noise of a fight reached her and ended the suspenseful quiet in a whirlwind of fury. Rainstone headed for the noise quickly, anxious to see how it was all going. She paused when she reached a clearing where a gigantic oak lay at the side, watching over the fighting.

Rainstone crouched against the ground and watched with narrowed eyes at the fight. From what she could see, it was all of ThunderClan's cats against half of Pinefur's cats. *ThunderClan is out-numbered, where are the other Clans? And the rest of Pinefur's cats?* She decided to keep moving as she saw Stormstar busy taking down two rouges.

As she continued her search, she found WindClan up against the other half of Pinefur's cats. They were out-numbered by Pinefur's cats, but they were holding their ground. *Where's ShadowClan?* Continuing on and losing faith that this would be an easy win for the Clans, she went in search of ShadowClan.

Scouring the territory, she found nothing and headed for the ThunderClan camp as it was getting darker and the fighting getting fiercer. She came up to the barrier and passed right through unchallenged. Looking around, she heard an angry yowl from a honeysuckle den weaved into the branches of an ancient fallen tree.

"Rogue! Get out of our camp!" the cat yowled again, and she saw it was a young golden she-cat with black spots and blazing green eyes.

"Clam down kit," Rainstone mewed, flipping the cat and pinning her with a wide paw in a fluid movement as the cat leapt at her. "I'm the cat who warned you Clans about Pinefur in the first place," she growled, letting the cat get up.

The she-cat kept up a defensive position and glared at her, but didn't attack again. "Leopardpaw! What was that?!" an anxious cat mewed, peeking its head out of the den.

"A rogue who claims to be on our side," Leopardpaw growled, keeping her eyes on Rainstone.

"Hey! It's you!" before any cat could stop her; Leafkit had bounded out of the den and ran up to her. Rainstone looked down at the kit, happy to see her unharmed.

"Leafkit! I'm glad you're alright," Rainstone purred, patting the kit's head.

"How do you know Leafkit?" Leopardpaw growled, dragging to kit away from her.

"Because I fished her out of the lake," Rainstone snapped, annoyed that she couldn't ask the question she'd came here for.

"That was you?" Leopardpaw mewed disbelievingly.

"Yes, but that's not why I'm here, where is-" Rainstone was cut off by an angry yowl as two cats broke into the camp. From the scent of them, they were Pinefur's cats, wounded, but only slightly, with eyes burning fire. "Good grief, what now?" she muttered irritably.

The two cats, one gray tabby she-cat, and a solid brown tom, raced toward where they were standing. She saw the tom dart for Leafkit, claws unsheathed and a dark glint in his amber eyes. "Not so fast!" Rainstone spat, jumping on the tom's back and forcing him to the ground while Leopardpaw dealt with the gray tabby while Wispheart picked up Leafkit and took the kit out of harm's way.

Rainstone grunted as she struggled with the tom while not taking any damage. She had been hurt once while carrying kits, she wouldn't let that happen now, not again. Finally she managed to get a good strike on his head and while he was dazed for a moment, she tackled him and pinned him, making sure that his paws couldn't get at her belly.

She glanced and saw that another cat had helped Leopardpaw pin

the tabby and they were chasing her off. Rainstone glared coldly down at the tom, Clan cats may be soft-hearted, but she wasn't. "End of the line, creep," Rainstone growled, snapping his neck like prey. He was dead in an instant, and she comforted herself with the fact that he wouldn't have felt anything.

She got up and walked toward Leopardpaw and the ginger tom with green eyes that had helped Leopardpaw. "They're gone, now, I have a question," Rainstone mewed.

"What is it?" Leopardpaw growled, still looking suspicious.

"Where's ShadowClan? They're the only cats I can't find," Rainstone mewed.

Both cats looked at her warily, but the ginger tom answered. "Half of ShadowClan is going to take down the other rogues on the other side of the lake, and the other half is reinforcements that just got here," the tom mewed in a husky voice.

"Are they being helped by RiverClan on the other side of the lake?" Rainstone asked sharply, stiffening.

The ginger tom shook his head, "No, but Duststar was confident."

Rainstone swore, shaking her head angrily. "I may not have planned any battles, but I know that those ShadowClan cats are doomed to failure," she snarled, fear rising as she wondered if Needlepine was in that half of the group.

It'd make sense, since he knows where their camp is. Without even mewing a goodbye, she darted out of the camp, racing for the lake and dodging the battling cats. *How could they be so stupid?! Without RiverClan, half a Clan will be clobbered!*

Huffing, she pushed herself as she raced along the shore. It was midnight by the time she reached the dock between RiverClan and ShadowClan territory. She didn't spare a glance for her old territory as she raced straight down the Thunderpath, entering into Nightwing's territory before long.

She paused, panting heavily as she stood on the open hill landscape,

blackness pressing around her from all sides and a faint mist wetting her face and weighting her whiskers down. *Where are they?!* The land was deathly silent and only the thin whistle of wind and rain could be heard.

With her tail trailing behind her, she raced low over the half-familiar territory. She skidded to a halt as she heard a dark cackle of laughter rang out in the night at the same time the heavy scent of blood hit her to almost knock her off her paws.

She raced to the top of the hill and crouched low in the grass. Her eyes picked out shapes in the dark of night, and her breath caught in her throat at what she saw. Even in the dark she could see the dark stain of blood on the grass and she could see the countless bodies that lay motionless on the ground.

ShadowClan was massacred! She could see Nightwing's many cats, and spotted the top cat himself, sitting with gleaming eyes and watching the battle field as his minions went among the cats, making sure they were dead. She could see Raven and Slate, they were grim-faced and stolid; they obviously didn't like this but had forced emotion away.

Is he there?! Her heart was beating desperately as she scanned the area for a red-orange mottled pelt. *Oh...* she spotted him and her heart stopped, she could only see the red blood that drenched his fur. *Is he still alive?* The thought was dull as she had already given up hope.

Stop it! It's too early to give up yet! You have to know for sure! Nightwing's cats haven't gotten to that section yet, they haven't made sure he was dead yet. But how to get down there without being seen? She stiffened as she heard a yowl of pain and she looked long enough to see that Nightwing's cats were torturing some poor cat to death.

Bile rose in her throat as she listened to the beaten cat being torn apart piece by piece. *There's nothing I can do*, she reminded herself, but that didn't help the fact she was turning her back on a suffering cat. *I've done it enough times, I should be used to it,* she tormented herself bitterly.

But she made it to Needlepine's side without being seen, the cats too engrossed in their fun for now. Even Nightwing was watching in interest. "Needlepine? Are you alright?" she whimpered, pressing her ear to his chest and sighing as she heart the steady heartbeat, but it wouldn't last long here.

"Raisnone?" Needlepine slurred woozily.

"Shh, I'll get you out of here, just relax, you'll be safe," Rainstone murmured, draping his much larger and heavier body over her thin shoulders so that his belly was center and his arms and legs dangled over each side. She was mountain strong and fear lent her strength as she moved as silently and steadily up the hill as she could.

She thanked the darkness and the rain that drove down more heavily now, it'd be almost impossible for them to be found once out of the territory. She wandered in the darkness almost aimlessly, just knowing she was heading for a border.

She blinked as she came upon a stream, *if I follow it down into RiverClan territory, I can probably cross, maybe get Willowwater's help*. She needed a place to treat Needlepine's wounds, as he was now unconscious from the loss of blood.

Oh thistle! If ShadowClan was defeated by Nightwing, and RiverClan isn't participating, then the other three Clans won't stand a chance if Nightwing brings his cats to Pinefur's aid! Oh, if only he hadn't helped Pinefur, then the Clans could have taken down Pinefur and Nightwing one by one, but Nightwing didn't take my warning... the fool.

Her thoughts ended abruptly as she entered RiverClan territory, finding a narrow place to jump across the stream. Her legs trembled from the strain of carrying Needlepine, but she forced them into a swift lope and leapt. It was a messy leap, and her legs buckled as she landed, but she managed to keep Needlepine on her back.

"Come on, let's find some help," she muttered to the still unconscious Needlepine. She decided she couldn't carry Needlepine much further and laid him down when she was relatively close to camp. She bandaged the worst of his wounds before sprinting toward the camp.

Once there, she could almost swear that what she had seen was just a nightmare compared to the peaceful contentment of the RiverClan camp. Sweetberry was on guard and Rainstone raced right past her before she could even do anything.

"Flickertail!" she called, running into his den and turning toward his neatly stacked pile of herbs. "I'm borrowing this stuff!" she mewed to the half-asleep medicine-cat and raced out with a bunch of herbs in her jaws.

"Rainstone!" Willowwater called running up to her. "What happened?"

"Disaster, why wasn't RiverClan helping?!" she mumbled angrily and despairingly.

"Sunstar wouldn't help..." Willowwater trailed off, eyes widening. "Are the other Clans losing?"

"Half of ShadowClan is gone already, if you don't want the Clans to die out, I suggest you go help the other Clans fend of Pinefur in ThunderClan territory, though you may be too late already," Rainstone growled, aware that a growing crowd had gathered.

"What are we going to do?!" Willowwater wailed in fear.

"I don't care," Rainstone spat, misery and blank apathy crashing down on her. "I'm leaving for good, I'm never coming back, it's up to you cats to defend yourselves, and I can't do it anymore. So goodbye Willowwater, I kept my last promise," she mewed hurriedly, rushing out of the camp of confused and frightened cats.

Getting back to Needlepine, she fixed him up as well as she could and had him resting easier in not too long. Then with the first light of dawn through the grey clouds, she hoisted him up again and carried him out of Clan territory.

Rainstone grunted, her head spinning in exhaustion as she breached the hill of the ridge surrounding the lake territories. She looked back once more; it looked so peaceful, the land flowing from one landscape to another. But she could feel it, the earth trembling as

murderers raged over it.

And I'm abandoning them. She felt apathetic to the cause now; they weren't totally doomed, if ThunderClan and the others had fought of Pinefur, then they could take down Nightwing more easily. But she had no desire to ever go back, she'd done all she could, and if the Clans hadn't done enough, she wasn't strong enough to help them anymore.

"I've just got to find a home for my kits and Needlepine, and that's all." Rainstone told herself firmly. She was done with problems, she'd let them rest for other cats to take care of. She knew she was being weak and selfish, but she hadn't been raised to keep fighting forever.

I'm sorry, I wish you all the best in the Clans and mountains, but I won't be helping you anymore, and I'm sorry Song, I'm leaving earlier then when you said I could go. You saved my life and I can't even follow your orders.

Rainstone looked ahead over the grassy landscape with the light of dawn just breaching on her and her mate that she carried on her shoulders. Hope filled her with the bright light, the cats would survive, and they couldn't all be beat as easily as she could. *And maybe my Legacy will be continued my kits... maybe they'll all finish what I started.*

...

"Well how do you like that?! That rogue left the Clans shattered and defeated, what's going to happen now, huh? Well, Song? How does your prized rogue fix this?" Song glanced unhappily at the speaker, Rosewing.

Rosewing was a pale red she-cat with dark brown paws and darker brown eyes, a former deputy of RiverClan that had been given more than one mess to fix. She was one of the few StarClan cats Song had befriended while staying in StarClan's hunting ground while watching over Rainstone.

"I'm disappointed by the defeat of the Clans as well, I honestly

thought they'd win with all Rainstone told them," Song returned heavily.

"Well, they are defeated, Pinefur has complete control over ThunderClan and WindClan while Nighwing took ShadowClan and has made advances on RiverClan, the Clans will be divided between the two before long," another cat spoke, the former medicine-cat of ThunderClan, Seedtail, a brown tabby tom with prophetic blue eyes.

"True," Song inclined her head. "But I don't believe that the Clans won't overcome this," the ancient black she-cat mewed.

"Perhaps, but there will be many lost lives because of this and it won't be easy," Rosewing mewed in harsh realism.

Song sighed, "Maybe I trusted too much in Rainstone's strength, I should have known how unstable she was from everything she endured from before."

"No, Rainstone was very strong, stronger than most Clan cats, but she just couldn't go on like that forever, so she took off as soon as she had the chance. She kept herself ignorant of the outcome of the attack because she knew she wouldn't be able to leave if she knew they'd been defeated," the WindClan apprentice Softpaw mewed, her pale gray fur dotted with odd orange marks.

Song shook her head and watched as Rainstone continued to move further and further away from the lake, not looking back once. She had Needlepine on her shoulders, and Song knew neither would ever go back to the lake. Rainstone was searching for a home, and she would find it and live contentedly the rest of her life.

"But which cat is going to liberate the Clans now?" Rosewing demanded impatiently.

"Is it not obvious?" groaned the former ShadowClan warrior Smokepool, a silver tom with black ears and hazel eyes, nodded at Song who was staring intently at Rainstone's retreating figure in a pool.

"Please tell me you're kidding, Song," Rosewing begged, staring hard

at the ancient she-cat.

"Does it not make sense?" Song retorted in defense, continuing to watch the dark gray she-cat.

"But you know Rainstone will never return! She doesn't care enough, you said so yourself," Rosewing argued.

"I never said she doesn't care enough, she just doesn't have the strength to act on her emotion, after all, she was raised to hide her true emotions and does it so well that only recently has she been able to recognize them, but it was too early for her to draw strength from them," Song explained.

"So she will return?" Seedtail asked; blue eyes hazy and unfocused as if he was constantly looking into the future.

"No, Rainstone will never come back herself, but I wasn't looking at her in the first place. There will be another with her courage and strength that will be given a much better beginning to emotions... A very special cat if I sense correctly," Song continued, staring hard at the picture of Rainstone and Needlepine.

"Are you talking about Rainstone's kits?" Softpaw asked, gold eyes sparkling.

"Yes," Song mewed, met by groans and cries from Rosewing and Smokepool.

"One problem, those kits aren't even born yet, and the Clans need help now, not to mention that this kit you have in mind couldn't find the Clans anyways," Smokepool pointed out.

"I don't think it's a bad idea, it would be too dangerous to have cats in the Clan alone to rescue themselves, an outside force will be needed," Seedtail nodded approvingly.

"Besides, I know what I saw, Rainstone, or her bloodline, will save the cats in the mountains, and that is my true goal, although it seems things have been so closely entwined with the Clans, that their survival depends on Rainstone's bloodline as well," Song explained.

"Well, I guess we can only trust you for now and help the Clans in any way we can," Rosewing sighed in defeat, her dark brown eyes worried and exhausted.

Every cat nodded and got up to go back to watch over their suffering Clans. Softpaw turned and looked at the still black ancient she-cat whose amber eyes bored into the figure of Rainstone. "Are you leaving to follow her?" Softpaw asked, halting every cat in their tracks to listen to Song's answer.

Song looked at the apprentice that had died too young, "Yes, there's something special about one of Rainstone's kits, it will need my help and guidance. But I will defiantly return, with Rainstone's Legacy."

Epilogue

Epilogue

Rainstone walked forward, her steps heavy and her movements slow. She was grateful that the sky was overcast, the hot sun hidden behind the protective clouds and a heavy breeze constantly flowing over her.

"Do you need to stop and rest?" Needlepine asked from her side, eyeing her anxiously.

She shook her head, too out of breath to respond in words. They'd left the Clans over half a moon ago, and the fact that she was carrying kits was more obvious than ever with the time for kitting drawing closer. That's why she couldn't stop.

She needed to find their home soon, very soon. But she wasn't worried, she could feel it, she was close, so close. She just knew that once she'd find this place, the place that would be her home with her mate and kits; she'd never feel the need to leave ever again. And she was happy with that.

She glanced at Needlepine, his green eyes scanning the surrounding bare landscape for enemies. At first, when he'd woken up after she'd carried him away from the lake, he had wanted to go back. But after watching her go on without him, had followed her, confessing that he had already decided that he would go with her if she really did leave.

They didn't know what had happened to the Clans, though Rainstone hoped they had won. But somehow... she felt things weren't so good back there, but she couldn't muster the strength to go back and help. The Clans had survived for countless seasons before she arrived, they'd survived tough spots before, and they'd survive this as well.

"Are you thinking about your Clan?" Rainstone asked breathlessly.

Needlepine looked at her gently, brushing against her side, inviting her to lean on him which she did gratefully. "Yes... I may have left ShadowClan, but I'll never forget them and everything I had there," Needlepine mewed with slight wistfulness.

Rainstone nodded, understanding, she had left a part of her heart back in the mountains and another sliver by the lake, she'd never leave it behind for good. "I know, but we will make our own home and raise our kits safe and soundly," Rainstone sighed, just picturing their kits with them.

"Okay, I need a break," Rainstone finally admitted, sitting down on the short yellow-green grass that was parted by sand.

"Are you hungry?" Needlepine asked, looking at her belly lovingly.

"Do you really need to ask?" Rainstone groaned, she was always hungry though it hadn't been like this the first time she had kits. *Of course they were dead, so hopefully this is a good sign?* She lay down on her side, squinting up at the gray colored sky while Needlepine went to hunt.

She twitched her nose as a raindrop fell, quickly followed by another and another. She twitched her ears as a rumble of thunder reached her ears and she sat up, shifting her rounded belly with the movement. She hunched her shoulders and looked around as the rain fell more heavily.

The surrounding area was completely bare, only the ground and the gray sky. Although a dark smudge in the far distance hinted at a forest. She shook her head, sniffing the air for what seemed like the hundredth time that day.

The air smelled different here than usual, a rich, heavy salty tang wetted her muzzle and kept her constantly licking her muzzle to ascertain the mineral that she was craving lately. The rain fell more heavily in a pounding haze and she looked around nervously for Needlepine.

She got to her aching paws and walked forward, as she continued, an odd roaring filled her senses and it reminded her of a constant

rumbling of thunder. Rainstone paused; the ground had become completely sandy and was massaging her tired paws as she walked in it.

I can feel it thrumming in my chest... I'm so close to where we'll stay, but where? The open area offered no protection from weather or enemies. Rainstone kept following the roaring sound in the driving rain that stung her eyes and lashed at her fur.

She halted abruptly as she ground fell away at her paws. She was standing on the edge of a sandy cliff, about as high up as the topmost rim of ThunderClan's hollow. It was almost a straight down drop, except for a thin, weaving trail that she could follow down.

But now she lifted her gaze, not looking down, but across. It stole her breath away, an expanse of dark blue-gray water stretched as far as she could see. The storm was driving the waves up dangerously high and the wind driving the rain down in sheets over the water.

It's amazing! She could hardly think the words as she stared open-mouthed; the water, the sand, the cliff. It was perfect for her, now all was left was to find Needlepine and a place for shelter.

But this is it, I'd never get tired of this, I can stay here for forever and a day.

Excerpt to Legacy: Timeless (Book #2)

Prologue

The wind rushed soundlessly over the clifftop, the salty air wet on the breeze. Down below, waves crashed against the beach that sloped away from the cliffs, the waves roaring in a never-ending rush and recession. The sun beat down on the sandy terrain, heating it to an uncomfortable temperature.

On this rather desolate landscape, moved a flash of burnished red and orange fur belonging to a cat. His green eyes were bright and he moved with the suppleness of a young cat. His fur stuck up in odd angles, a result of living in such a salty air, and a freshly caught rabbit hung from his mouth.

He approached the edge of the cliff, unperturbed by the long drop and treacherous trail as he made his way down a thin, eroding sandy trail, navigating it with practiced ease. He paused on the trail a few tail-lengths above the beach where the waves clawed hungrily not more than twenty tail-lengths away.

The red-orange tom ducked into a small rock cave hollowed out in the side of the cliff. It was a rather large den, enough for four grown cats to stand in comfortably at once. It was hollowed out of the earth, so the ground and walls were soft, but almost as hard as rocks so they didn't have to worry about erosion.

The tom stepped into the cave, the front half illuminated from the light outside, the back half framed in shadows. His eyes brightened even more then before when they fell upon a cat laying on her side in the moss-grass nest in the very back of the den.

"Rainstone," he purred happily, feeling affection and tenderness wash over his already joyful heart. There was nothing he loved more than seeing his beloved safe and sound in the cave. Rainstone

was small with a round head, sharply pricked ears, and large, round paws that looked too big in comparison to the rest of her size.

"Needlepine," Rainstone answered with a content sigh. Her dark gray fur was silky smooth, for some reason it wasn't affected by the salty air like his was, and the dark blue tints on her fur had grown stronger around her paws since they had finished their travelling at this spot.

"Were you okay while I was gone?" Needlepine asked, setting down the prey. He was always nervous about leaving his mate alone, especially now.

"Yes, Scorch is fine too," Rainstone purred, eyeing the prey hungrily.

Needlepine felt a surge of excited delight at Scorch's name, the little kitten was only a few days old, but already he knew she was perfect. He gave the prey to Rainstone and peered into the curve of her belly where one, tiny kitten slept.

Scorch was small; he could tell she had the same body as Rainstone, the characteristics of the mountain cats Rainstone had travelled from. But her fur was red-orange like his, except it was a tone darker, as if his fur colors had been put in shadows. The kitten's right ear, paw, and left eye were patched black, giving an even greater shadowed effect. And when Scorch had opened her eyes that morning, they'd been green like his, but so dark they were almost black. Like how Rainstone's eyes were blue, but almost black.

But they were both perfect to Needlepine, and he couldn't suppress his happiness and thankfulness that Rainstone had come into his life. But like always, as he thought about when he met Rainstone, he thought of his Clan, ShadowClan.

He and Rainstone had left the Clans during a revolution started by rogues and Clan-cats. He didn't know how the battle had turned out, but he knew that the fight he had been a part of had been a complete defeat. He would be dead if Rainstone hadn't dragged him off the battlefield.

But that was in the past, he believed the Clans would be alright. Right now, all he had to worry about was protecting his mate and kit and providing food for them all. An easy thing to do when there was only the two of them to eat fresh-kill.

Needlepine shared the rabbit he'd caught with Rainstone, looking at her with glimmering eyes over his meal. Rainstone looked so much different from when he'd first met her. She'd always been running places, doing things, always busy as if she was trying to distract herself while anxiety and worry showed black in her eyes.

But now, she had an air of calm and enjoyment as if she was finally living life and enjoying every bit of it. Her eyes were sparkly blue and although she was never busy, she wasn't idle and wandering. She loved to sit outside their den and stare out into the ocean for a long time, especially at sunset when the sun sank behind the waters.

Needlepine purred lightly, feeling contentment settle down on his shoulders like a soft blanket. Nowhere to go, no threats, not much to do, a family he loved, a home where he felt safe. He had everything he could have hoped for, and so did Rainstone.

But he didn't notice as he settled down to sleep with Rainstone, the wide, wondering stare given by his kit. A dark eyed stare that saw things he couldn't, and saw it all.